



ALBERTINE IN THE LIONS' DEN

by NICOLE

THE STORY OF A PARISIENNE

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What could be more wonderful than to be young and beautiful, in Paris and in love . . . particularly when the recipient of your affections isn't your husband! After all, husbands do have their place (at home), but a lover (or better yet, lovers) is much more exciting to a young woman bored with the monotonous routine of life in the provinces.

Through her best friend, Cécile, Albertine finds herself living in a delightfully sophisticated atmosphere with a Parisian family, who pursue their numerous indiscretions with great taste and considerable zest. Against this background of pleasant iniquity, Albertine

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IN THE LIONS' DEN

BY NICOLE
Georgette Dupont

Translated from the French

by Ruth Whipple Fermaud



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“Vous êtes mon lion superbe et généreux.”
DOÑA SOL

“Au couvent! Au couvent!”
HAMLET

Albertine in the Lions' Den

Wednesday, September 18

*M*y dear Cécile,

It's much harder to leave one's husband than it is to forget him. But don't tell anybody in Bordeaux; it's a city that can't bear the truth.

In short, I am reborn. Gone are adolescent pimples, scruples, soul searchings. Paris has nothing to do with it, but I walk around with a brand-new future and the remedy is good. Instead of missing the past, I think of the future. Life has become interesting again. Of course, I have a little nest egg . . . Ah, my sweet, what if money meant happiness . . . ! But don't let's speak of such horrid things.

Cécile, Cécile—liberty is a marvelous adventure. Don't think I'm a monster: if Jacques suffers it is from hurt pride. Let him read his newspaper in peace. A peaceful love is a degradation undeserved by anyone my age. Besides, what prevented him from keeping me at home? Why did he say, "Well, all right, yes, go to Paris, go live your life . . . ! Let's not decide anything now. You'll write to me, you'll think it over . . ." and then that masculine irony, "Have fun"?

And so I am having fun. I walk alone along the quays

stopping anywhere for lunch, I read all night, I take too hot baths; in a word, I wallow in the innocent occupations forbidden in married life. Meanwhile, I dream, I look around, I reminisce little and imagine a lot. With such a program you can easily understand that I haven't had time to visit your cousins, the Robert-Guichards. But I'll go and see them soon, for this hotel life is too expensive and it would be ideal if they could rent me that room you mentioned.

Thank you, dear Cécile, for that and for everything else. Without your advice I would still be lost in hesitations and frustrations.

Love,
Albertine

Thursday the nineteenth

My dear Albertine,

I've been waiting for your letter these last two days, sad and at loose ends since you left. Your news cheers me up; I see I wasn't wrong to encourage your flight, but let me point out straight away that you thank me for advice which I didn't give you.

I never told you to leave your husband, Albertine. Break up? Why, in heaven's name? Jacques is a good husband: young, steady, ambitious. Just because you have such a romantic love that a provincial businessman would have a difficult time living up to it, is that a reason for ending a marriage which has been a success up till now?

No. I merely said—with insistence, and using the authority which my being nearly thirty gives me in your eyes—that you needed to get away from Bordeaux for a while. Your ups and downs, your depressions, your caprices, which were making life impossible for your husband and often

for your friends, were due to one thing only: your inability to leap the hurdle of the third year of marriage . . .

I know it's a difficult moment, that of de-effervescence. You no longer have for Jacques the exhilarating feelings of those first days—and yet you continue to live on the memory of a passion which now makes you find subtle forms of love insipid. In a word, you are bored. Dissatisfied with yourself, you think only of dissatisfying others. It's a very banal sickness which requires the most banal and ancient remedy: amusement. Why is it that in the twentieth century the least little sprain in routine leads to thoughts of divorce? Better to open a parenthesis in your married life—you can close it in a few weeks. At times it is wise to allow oneself to do forbidden things. Don't deny yourself any pleasures which come your way. When it becomes unbearable to live with yourself it's time to let yourself go. That is why I suggested the Robert-Guichards. You'll find they live in an elegant, relaxed and slightly immoral atmosphere, ideal for a young woman in your frame of mind. Go and see them. They'll take care of you and give you a good time. Get busy having fun.

Affectionately,
Cécile

Saturday noon

Fiddle-faddle . . . my dear Cécile you talk very well but wasn't it you who said when I got married that Jacques was so perfect I'd grow tired of never being able to find fault with him? . . . And La Rochefoucauld's maxim which I heard before my engagement: "There are good marriages but none that are delicious!" Not to mention the Chinese proverb: "Marriage is like a besieged town: those on the

inside want to get out and those on the outside want to get in." Remember, at that time I was outside; for three years now I've been inside. Let's be logical; but don't get angry and don't protest, since I am thanking you.

Besides, to be frank, your advice alone might not have been enough without an incident which I didn't mention to you at the time because it was so mortifying. Now I find it amusing and I'll tell you about it.

You know that my husband always gets up very early in the morning and that he used to leave on his desk notes for me which I would find after he had left. At the beginning of our marriage they were love letters, but fairly quickly, mixed in with the tender phrases, were reminders of things to do that day or week and sometimes reproaches for my carelessness, my lack of punctuality, my untidiness, etc.

But none of these equaled the last of these letters which I found two weeks ago, the morning after a dinner party which had been a lot of work and a great success. Here it is:

Darling,

The party was perfect, lovely indeed!

Flowers, delicious food, pretty decorations, friendly conversation and so much wit!

You were the queen and everyone was at your feet!

Today a simple and humble suggestion. You know how full of admiration I am for your gracefulness, your physical perfection!

But your bath water, whether in Bordeaux or in the country, is too hot. It's bad for your complexion and for the elasticity of your skin. Our last gas bill was almost quadrupled: it went from 3,780 francs to 12,000 and some francs.

May I recommend that you don't let the hot water run

for minutes on end while you are in the water up to your neck? Your thoughts are elsewhere, soaring and happy, but the meter is adding up those precious moments of escape.

Still, I admire you—everything was so well said and so well done last night. I adore you.

Jacques

That, my good friend, is what made me decide to leave a husband who treats me like a twelve-year-old. Nurseries are nice, but not for life. There are times when I would rather suffer than go on living in that comfortable monotony. Ah, for a man, a real man at last!

"Albertine is mad, stark raving mad."

It's true, Cécile, but I would never admit it to anyone but you. Deep down inside, some devil makes me hope that you smother in your legitimacy.

You see, dear girl, like all rebels I am already trying to get a following.

Love,

Albertine

P.S. I am going to your aunt's on Wednesday at four o'clock. On the phone she was charming—she has a very pleasant voice.

Tuesday, September 24

Dear Albertine,

If you mobilize La Rochefoucauld, Chinese proverbs and logic it's because you are determined to be right. Let's not argue about it. It would do no good to tell you that a man can, at the same time, love his wife and keep an eye on the gas . . . It is a truth that is hard to bear.

Dear little goose, your letter smacks of chalk and black-

board: Albertine is going to take some courses in love. Study, my dear, study hard but be a little cautious, for a "real man" . . . brrr . . . ! However, it's a big job to find a man, and as you are a young lady in a hurry, wouldn't it be simplest if straight away you put the following classified ad in the evening papers: "Young woman, 25, round face, attractive in all respects, seeks real man. Object: suffering. Must be serious."

And if, by some miracle, the supply exceeds the demand, please, Albertine, think of the rest of us. I admit that I for one have never met a "real man" and would be awfully curious to see what such an animal is like.

On the other hand, I know only too well what a real woman is like and I'd like to put you on guard against this species of which my aunt, Marie-Laure, is a member. Her pretty voice impressed you and so will everything else about her: her refined snobbery, her languor, her beauty. Beware of this woman, Albertine. Seven years ago she finally managed to sink her fangs legally into Uncle Alfred, after spending several years consoling him for the loss of his first wife. She knew how to make herself liked by everyone: Georges and Florence were delighted to have a stepmother almost their own age, who was able to make them forget a rather touchy situation. But as the years have gone by, Marie-Laure has turned the children and the father against each other. There have been quarrels. Later on my cousins discovered that Marie-Laure was quietly robbing them of their rights by getting Alfred to put most of his property in her name—she had no money of her own. Behind that absent-minded smile and those innocent eyes is a scheming mind. What is more, Florence has found it rather risky to bring home boy friends who are not unattractive to her stepmother. But this last characteristic will be useful to us. I certainly shan't blame Marie-Laure for liking young men

and for encouraging young talent, for if real men exist, my dear Albertine, it is in the wake of real women that you are apt to find them, in the same way that shrimps follow after crawfish.

So be it.

Cécile

Friday, 11 o'clock

Dear Cécile,

Everything went well at Rue de Lille. Your aunt was charming—I haven't yet caught a glimpse of that monster in her which you describe. She showed me around the flat, and I admired its elegance: each room is like a boudoir.

We had tea. We talked about Bordeaux, about the nice weather we're having in Paris now. At last she asked me if I was comfortable at the hotel and we came to the subject which interested me most.

We went up to the sixth floor and I saw the room—originally two maids' rooms made into a studio with a kitchenette and a shower. The walls of the big room are covered with old-rose silk, very unexpected so high up. It's exactly what I have always dreamed of: attic windows, a view of the rooftops like something out of a Carné film, the toilet on the landing (. . . but I have the key). We came to an agreement at once. It was amusing because for your sake, for mine, in memory of I don't know what memories, with a more and more dreamy look, she forsook an American, a Brazilian couple, a Czech painter (full of talent) and two other artists (no less gifted)—a forsaking which is to cost me 20,000 francs a month but it's "too, too lovely" as your aunt says, and my hotel room costs more than 1,000 francs a day . . .

With my usual energy I have already found a use for my

future savings: a little Spanish writing-desk which I have just bought in an antique shop in the Rue de Verneuil. I think you would like it: nine drawers plus a secret one with a vague painted hunting scene, scarcely visible on the front, which gives a mysterious effect to the whole thing. I've always had a secret passion for drawers, and I have bought notebooks and note paper. I have even ordered a special size of stationery, and I'm hunting for a seal. I've almost forgotten the most important item: I have three keys, three keys which lock my nine drawers . . .

That is the extent of my high living in Paris! As for the rest . . . the description of one of my gay evenings will show you how right you are to laugh at me.

Richard Vincent, the dear friend who has been awaiting my arrival "for centuries"—which gave him time to finish at the Polytechnique and go to work in a factory, came to fetch me yesterday in the Rue de Lille in my new rooms, which I had just finished cleaning. He arrived breathless after mounting six flights of stairs which made his heartiness all the more hiccupy: "Same as ever . . . haven't changed a bit . . . Great what they do with maids' rooms these days. Here we go, the little old Panhard is waiting . . ."

You know how I loathe that hail-fellow-well-met jargon! "Albertine," I said to myself, "keep calm, be a lady and smile."

So I smiled as I climbed into his Panhard convertible, while touches the curb—it's so up-to-date. Forward march, the Panhard takes off.

"Good little engine. Excellent pickup in first. Had one checkup during the running in, nothing since then. On hills the MG is no good and the 15 Citroen uses too much gasoline. Ought to adopt the German system; too bad the Mercedes is so expensive and, then too, it's hard to replace parts. Well, it seems that Citroen, with its new model . . ."

. . . And so we arrived at the nice, quiet little restaurant where the chow is out of this world—but this restaurant closes on Thursdays and it was Thursday.

“Ah! Hang it all . . .”

“No, don’t ask me. I don’t know of any others in the neighborhood—I’ve lived in Bordeaux for so long.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

Intense mental activity.

As for me, I kept repeating to myself, “Albertine, be a lady and smile.”

So I kept smiling as the little Panhard started off once more to another quiet little restaurant where the chow is out of this world . . .

Cécile, I have never known a place in Bordeaux as sad, provincial and depressing. Light globes on the ceiling and ferns everywhere. I had been dreaming of gypsy violins, wood fires, small lamps on the tables, vodka and a rather Russian atmosphere . . . Richard explained how he modernizes his factory using the Bedaux method. You can’t imagine how much time is saved by rationalization of work. I was dumfounded—and lost as I was under an avalanche of figures, still a lady, I kept smiling. Then, since the steak pie (“our speciality, 700 francs for two”) still hadn’t arrived, we talked about me and my plans. I was silly enough to say that I would like to go to Lapland to see herds of reindeer gliding across the desert in the moonlight . . .

My dear, the entire paper tablecloth was not large enough for the explanation of the physiochemical mechanism of a boreal sunrise, and just as Richard snapped his fingers to ask for a second tablecloth, I got up, gave them (Richard and the tablecloth) one last desperate look and made a dash for the door without a word.

The next morning I wrote this to Richard:

Richard, you have bored me more in three hours than Jacques in three years—I left Jacques. So you'll excuse my outburst of temper. One bit of advice: don't explain the theory of a boreal sunrise to a young woman unless you hope to marry her: if she listens, don't hesitate. She adores you.

Yours truly,
Albertine

I thought that would be the end of it and I was enjoying an extra degree of freedom. I felt sated and happy to have devoured a polytechnician at no extra charge.

But here's the message I have just received:

Albertine, spoiled child, you are just as I have always loved you: unpredictable, adorable. But don't tease me too much. I'll meet you at twenty past six tomorrow at the Colisée. I'll have a surprise for you, naughty girl.

Richard

Cécile, I give up. I appeal to respectable men only. Write to me, tell me anything but make it funny.

Love,
Albertine

P.S. As for your famous Didier, I haven't set eyes on him. I've telephoned ten times but he's never at home. Another character.

Monday, September 30

To appeal to respectable men, Albertine, is the price of your recaptured youth. They will all ask you to marry them! Quick! Climb back up that ladder of years which you de-

scended so thoughtlessly: frivolity is a luxury for adults only.

You must also remember that men are boring, just as grass is green, for the simple reason that they think they interest us when they talk about something other than us. When Philippe was wooing me, for one whole spring the topic of conversation was the Black Sea Straits. During the month of April with the perfume of linden trees! . . . One day, finishing his lecture and seeing me gazing off into space, he exclaimed, "I see that all this makes you think!" Think, the poor dear! It's true I was thinking, but my pensive look was that of the victim dying to be eaten. The Dardanelles! . . .

I'm happy that you took my cousins' room. Your story of the desk with nine drawers and three keys reminds me of the one about nuts and teeth: when one has teeth one has no nuts and when one has nuts one has no more teeth. When one has letters there are no keys and when one has keys . . . perhaps, my dear, you haven't yet understood that you no longer have to fear the pangs of conscience of an unfaithful wife? Liberty gives back your serenity, a sort of bourgeois peace of mind. I wonder if I don't prefer . . .

Well, my dear, I wish you many love affairs, not just one, and above all, other dawns than boreal.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Wednesday night

Do you really believe, dear Cécile, that one must go off to Paris to deceive one's husband, and that Bordeaux is hostile to adultery? Did I have to leave my husband if all I wanted were the sensations you speak of? That's just what I didn't want; I wanted to munch gaily on my nuts while

I still have teeth. I don't believe in proverbs, they bore me. Why should moss be an asset to a stone? Not to mention the rust and slimy worms under the moss . . . You're going to say that I am pleading my own cause—I, who have never been able to finish what I start: I left college before getting my M.A.; instead of studying Italian I traveled around Italy on my motorbike; after three years of marriage I abandon my husband for no reason . . . so be it.

But let's get back to serious things. I met the seducer (you know who) last Saturday on the terrace of the Colisée:

"Good evening" he says with his harmonic voice and, straight away, "Albertine, really you're terrible!"

Terrible Albertine gave a wan little smile of apology to indicate that she suffered more than anyone else from her deplorable temper.

"Well, we won't talk about it any more," he said. "Let's talk about what you are doing these days."

I replied that my plans weren't very definite, that I was still too nervous and bewildered.

"... of course. That's why I avoided the subject the other night . . . ah! Albertine, how he must suffer! . . ."

I kept a modest and weary silence.

"... to lose a woman like you," he went on, "to have known her . . . to have held her in his arms . . . to have made her happy, perhaps . . ." Here he obviously awaited a denial—which he didn't get.

"... yes, to have made her happy . . . and then to lose her! Albertine, Jacques must suffer horribly. Jacques's so kind, so serious . . ." (He talked about him as though he were dead!)

"Richard, for my sake, let's change the subject."

"Waiter! Two glasses of port."

This was the prelude to his complete life story. I'll spare you the cradle, the nurse, his mother whose milk supply

dried up because her husband was being unfaithful to her in Mexico where he was building a port—and that atmosphere of maternal passion following the great bourgeois traditions: spare the rod and spoil the child. So the dear child withdrew into himself. At this point there was a whole series of childhood anecdotes illustrating a personality given to secret heroism. Then he takes my hand and says:

“Albertine, forgive me, I don’t know how to talk to women. You see, I’ve worked too hard. That reminds me of a story which proves that I’ve always been silly. When I was at boarding school—I wasn’t ten years old at the time—I waited the whole term for the moment when I could go home and see my mother. The school was horrible. Ah, those schools in Auvergne run by priests! Well, it seems that’s how they make a man out of you in France.

“Anyway, to make a long story short, the night before the bus was due to come at dawn to take the little boys into Clermont-Ferrand to catch the train, I remember that I couldn’t sleep. Each boy who was to be awakened in time for the bus had tied a handkerchief to the iron bar at the foot of his bed. I chose the largest one. I had to be sure that the two corners could be seen from a distance, and I spent the night watching over those corners; I was so afraid I’d be forgotten . . . Yet, when I finally saw my mother and father I didn’t show my happiness. I talked about my friend, Francis, who raised silkworms in boxes . . . I talked and talked about the raising of silkworms. My mother was disappointed and the whole vacation was spoiled because of this homecoming.

“You see, we change very little. Forgive me, Albertine: I’ve waited so long for you.”

Well, my dear, I had tears in my eyes. I listened to him, my moist hand in his equally moist one, and I was thrilled.

“Waiter! Two more ports.”

When he had got through his adolescence, the cruelty of girls and the cynicism of women—other women, naturally, those who aren't honest enough to leave their husbands—the first impetus kept my emotion high. At this moment he brought out of his pocket a felt-covered, rather long jewel box which he put in my hands.

"Open it, Albertine."

"But, Richard, what is it?"

"It's for you, my dear love, it has always been intended for you."

I opened the box, feeling rather uncomfortable, and saw a magnificent pair of diamond pendant earrings.

"Those are my grandmother's earrings, Albertine. She would have liked you so much..."

"I!!!"

"... my grandmother was a charming old lady ... etc. ... etc. ..." There was no stopping him.

At last he noticed my astonishment.

"Of course, Albertine, you can do what you like with them. I had thought that a ring ... that you would choose yourself..."

There it was: the awful thought was spoken!

I won't bore you with the ensuing conversation. It was all too touching to run off quickly and I dragged myself from the Champs-Élysée to the Rue de Lille through the nauseating labyrinths of eternal friendship.

But is it plausible that at my age, after deserting my husband, I should be offered, in the twentieth century, in the middle of Paris, on the terrace of a café and by an old friend, Grandmother's earrings? Doesn't this kind of bad luck make you believe in fate?

The same evening I went to see *Partage de Midi*. I don't know if you remember the play but I was finished off by the story of that good mother who within a few months devours

two insolent males loaded with machine guns: the one who had had all the women and the one who was a virgin . . . ! Ah, that dear man Claudel! Of course, all this takes place in China in the middle of a massacre. Nonetheless, I was bothered, I can tell you, when I heard phrases like, "Happy the woman who finds her master."

I'm dead tired. I'll tell you later about the astounding phone call I received at the Robert-Guichards' from your friend Didier.

Adieu—kisses,

Albertine

P.S. I'm going to start working, I'm just too discouraged.

Thursday, October 3

My dear Cécile, here is the next installment of my misfortunes.

I was having lunch with your cousins. It was the first time and I was a little nervous, although everyone was polite enough not to smother me with attentions. Georges was telling the latest remark of a young novelist about an Academician known for his chastity, "He is said to have spent his life asking himself, 'To bed or not to bed?' . . . a fate worse than Hamlet's," Georges continued. "Since the Immortals of the French Academy are not dealing with ghosts, lovely ladies are in the habit of shoving their bosoms right under the dear men's noses! . . . What an era!" he remarked, turning to me. I began to blush and Marie-Laure came to the rescue. "You see," she explained, "my stepson is an editor and feels he has the right to be as crude as the authors of the novels he publishes."

The telephone put an end to all this wit. Marie-Laure was called, but she returned to get me almost immediately.

It was the famous Didier who hoped to find me at your cousins'. I heard a low, well-modulated voice:

"Sol! At last this is the intelligent friend, the alter ego, another Cécile in short..."

A little taken aback, I replied with the standard phrase "Oh, you know, Cécile always exaggerates; I wish it were ..."

He interrupted me. "No, no, it's undoubtedly true. And that is why, knowing this, I deserve twice as much credit in wanting to meet you, my dear lady; for it's good to know one intelligent woman in a lifetime, but one is enough." Without letting me speak he added that he had sworn to limit himself in this domain, since intelligence, like opium, is toxic.

"And if you knew, Madame, how long and painful the cure is. It's unbelievable how many stupid women must be used up to forget just one intelligent one." He told me finally that he would get in touch with me very soon and that he would limit himself to the sole pleasure of talking to me about you! He asked me to pass on to you his best regards and this conversation.

Flabbergasted and flushed, I went back to the dining room. I asked your aunt if the fellow was mad. "Oh yes," she replied, "quite mad. He's a delightful madman. He's so brilliant. You'll like him a lot when you meet him. But what did he say to you?"

I replied that it was the first time a man I didn't even know had warned me that he had no intention of making love to me. For a second your aunt gazed off into space, then she turned gracefully to me and said, "Don't worry if that's all that is bothering you. He'll make love to you, he can't help himself. Besides, why should he, he does it so well, don't you think?" looking at Florence who only smiled and nodded as if to say "touché." Your uncle, who had kept

silent up to that moment, began grumbling, "Make love, make love, you make me laugh, all of you . . . Love! You don't even know what it is any more!"

"But, my dear Father," Georges said, "things haven't changed as much as you think; you're forgetting that the heart is a phoenix which repeats itself endlessly . . ."

I found him vulgar and less handsome than before: a little movie-star and Colgate toothpaste ad . . . I didn't remember him at all like that. I remembered Florence even less—she was only fifteen when she visited Bordeaux. I think she is breathtakingly beautiful. She looks like a young Venetian courtesan ready to pose as a madonna. All in all, I was won over by everyone's poise and surprised, after what you had told me, by the atmosphere of understanding—a sort of gay affection between them which makes their welcome warm.

It was suggested that I should have lunch with them every day (as a paying guest) if I liked. We'll see. For the moment I followed your advice and asked Georges if he couldn't find a little time-killing job for me. When he found out that I knew Italian he told me that he had something in mind for me, that he would tell me more later.

Au revoir, my sweet, everything is fine. A tiny bit homesick perhaps, but I think it's just the weather. It's raining.

Love,

Albertine

P.S. I saw Georges's little boy. He's funny, that child: he had been to the zoo and he came home saying, "I wish I was a little animal, I love bears! It's too bad I was made by daddies." Horrors . . . only three and he has already grasped the drama of our species!

Speaking of species, I spent the evening thinking up biting retorts for your Didier—a little late unfortunately! But since we're back on the subject may I ask you this: why

didn't you tell me there was something between you two other than that intellectual communion you talk about so much?

Saturday, 4 o'clock

Dear Albertine,

Beware of hasty judgments. I've kept nothing from you. If Didier talked to you about me in ambiguous terms, it's because the complicity of thought between two beings gives them pleasures which are not so different from those of love. You can take possession of a mind with words just as you take possession of a body with caresses. Intelligence can give voluptuous pleasures; and since there is, as yet, no law against them, I can shamelessly confess that I am bound to Didier by sensations of this sort. I like his talent and his faults amuse me. It has always seemed absurd to me to blame writers for their self-conceit. Doesn't talent excuse overconfidence just as vanity is justified by beauty? And, if a pretty woman is forgiven for looking at herself in the mirror, why should a clever man be blamed for liking the sound of his own voice?

Didier wasn't making fun of you but he knows that the best way to intrigue a woman is to shock her. Moreover, in his circle, wit excuses a multitude of sins.

Apropos, your surprise at finding my cousins so friendly and gay leads me to believe that you expected to see them tear each other apart from the first meal on. Don't worry, I sent you to people who know how to control themselves, and so that you may better appreciate "everyone's poise," I'm going to tell you of an incident, provoked by Florence last spring, which would have shaken a less civilized family.

Florence hated to see her father deceived by his wife. For a long time she had been toying with ideas of vengeance

without daring to act, and she had reached such a point of exasperation that the worst didn't seem bad enough. Then one morning she received a bouquet of flowers for her step-mother accompanied by a card. She thought she recognized the writing on the envelope so she put the flowers in the living room, locked herself in her room, opened the envelope and saw the hated name: Lucien X, Attorney at Law. Acting upon one of those impulses we regret so quickly, she added to the lawyer's title this other title: "Your wife's lover." She slipped the card in an envelope addressed to her father and rang for the maid.

My uncle, seated behind his broker's desk, received the billet-doux on a silver platter. No one was there, alas, to see his stupefaction, so this unique moment was lost to all.

An ordinary husband would have rushed to his wife and made a scene. Alfred finished dictating his letter, dismissed his secretary at the usual time, and only then did he go to his wife's room as he did every evening before dinner. Very simply he held out the card to his wife and asked her if she could enlighten him.

An ordinary wife, caught off guard, would have become upset, cried and perhaps even confessed. It seems that Marie-Laure faced the accusation with that innocent look of hers. She expressed her sadness at such a coarse gesture. She was surprised and searched for an explanation; in short, she was able to turn Alfred's attention from herself to Florence and, so as not to abuse a dearly loved daughter, she insinuated that only Georges could be at the bottom of this unfortunate joke. She even let it be understood that her stepson had made advances to her and would undoubtedly be less treacherous if he had met with more success.

This last bit of news astounded Alfred. He forgot all about Lucien. Now it was only a question of letting his son

know that he wasn't fooled by his tricks. He went to Georges but, instead of disowning this unworthy son, he told him he understood: nothing was more natural than the jealousy of a son for a father, nothing more normal for a young man than to be affected by the presence of a pretty woman, nothing more human than to go further than one intended, nothing more irritating than to be rejected. Yes, he understood . . . but he deplored the repercussions that rash statements, undoubtedly inspired by a desire for vengeance, had had on a young imaginative girl. He then showed the card to Georges, adding that Marie-Laure had explained everything.

Georges, who told me about all this, at first listened to his father completely dumfounded, then rapidly grasped his stepmother's scheme. But he decided that everyone would be harmed if her affair were brought to light: Marie-Laure would lose her lover, Florence and himself their peace, and Alfred a faithful bridge partner. Thus, instead of becoming indignant as an ordinary stepson would have done, he chose to plead slightly guilty, assuring his father that Marie-Laure must have misunderstood his teasing. "And you know, my dear father, that a woman's imagination is an ogress forever in search of an innocent victim to feed on!"

Nothing brings two men together better than to chuckle at our little faults. Each one finds proof of his virility. When they got around to mythomania everything was settled and Alfred, quite reassured, went off to his daughter's room.

Instead of scolding her, he simply took her hands affectionately in his. He told her that she should control her overactive imagination which brought forth monsters, that she was like little girls who are afraid of wolves and see one

behind every door . . . This word "lover," which she used so carelessly, would lose its prestige when she came to know a bit more about life and understood that there are fewer unfaithful wives in real life than in novels. He advised her to take up sports and to become a member of the Racing Club.

Alfred had no sooner left than Georges came in. "No harm done," he said. "I've just played Hippolytus to save the family, but you, my girl, are old enough to know that truth is a bomb which kills both the one who drops it and the one who receives it!"

This was the final word of the story and Lucien appeared for the bridge game the following Wednesday as if nothing had happened.

What security for you, Albertine, to be received by people immoral enough not to cut their neighbor's throat when they are insulted. Accept their hospitality without fear. In any case, success is certain: people like you. One offers meals, another diamonds. Learn how to organize all this good will according to each one's talent: the Robert-Guichards for everyday use, Richard for chores, and Didier for splurges.

Good-by, my lovely, Bordeaux is gloomy in the rain. I see no other pleasures in sight for me but yours so be extravagant.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Tuesday, October 8

You have a genius, my dear Cécile, for rejuvenating old ideas. Unfortunately I have a sturdy common sense which makes me see white as white and black as black—so noth-

ing from now on can keep me from considering your cousins as monsters. When I think that all those lovely people gather smilingly together every day to share the family sirloin! Oh well . . .

Your poor old uncle is the only one I feel sorry for in the whole affair; he's too good to catch on to the intrigues of that bunch of bandits. For me, of course, there is nothing but purring and smiles. Each one tries to get me on his side and I am showered with attentions. At least one worth-while thing has come of it: Georges kept his promise and we have an appointment next Friday with the director of translations at Birnbaums. I hope everything goes well, for I'd like to do something other than wander around Paris.

My studio flat is furnished now and it would be nice to work here. Florence took me to see one of her friends who makes lamp shades and I chose one—a big white one, lined in cyclamen pink which gives such a poetic light that it makes you want to talk softly and recite Albert Samain's poetry! . . . But, since we cannot always choose our reading material to match our lamp, I gobbled up *The Lazy Mosquito*, a mystery story, the other night as well as a half bottle of red wine and a sausage sandwich! How wonderful to be able to give in to one's vices without hearing, "Listen, darling, you're not sensible, you're going to make yourself sick . . ."

Basically, what I really wanted was to be alone. But I'm still weak and I accepted a dinner invitation two days ago with poor Richard who won't give up. Refusing to admit it's his personality I'm allergic to, he blames his technique and has altered it. He now displays a stilted jolliness which he believes is licentious. It's almost funny.

Would you be nice enough to go to my home and, pretending they are for you, ask Jacques for my Italian dic-

tionaries and send them to me? There's no hurry but you'd be doing me a favor.

Good-by, poker face.

Yo te quiero,

Albertine

P.S. I almost forgot to tell you that I received an invitation for a cocktail party next Tuesday at a Rue Bonaparte bookshop for the presentation of an electronic fox, sent to me by Monsieur Didier Marèze without a word. I don't believe I'll go although I would like to see the fox.

Talking of parties: Marie-Laure and her stepdaughter are going to give an open-house together. It's even worse than I thought. What moral degeneration!

Wednesday the ninth

I'm beginning to suspect, dear Albertine, that you naïvely expected to have a good time while remaining virtuous. Impossible, angel, impossible. You must choose: respectable people bore you and the other type shocks you . . . bah! you'll soon realize that it is less disagreeable to be shocked than bored. . . . By the way, if frivolity horrifies you, what did you expect to get from life in Paris? I'll end up believing you left your husband in order to eat sausages at night!

But that's nothing—your pity for “poor old Uncle Alfred” is what amused me the most. Didn't you know that in his youth my uncle was a professional seducer? To show you that white is rarely as white as one thinks, here is an anecdote known in the family as “The Sea Air.”

Scene: a small beach in Brittany in the month of May. Alfred is recuperating from his amorous victories of the previous winter. A short-lived truce, however, for almost at once he notices a young lady playing with her baby on

the beach. Instantly Alfred hears the call to arms summoning the male to his sacred duty: seduction. A flower in his hat and ammunition ready as called for in the chapter: Conquest of Mother on Beach. Construction of sand castles for the child, obliging gurgles, small cakes, big balloon, gallant attentions. In a few days the fort is taken. Our Don Juan notices that his amorous feats are welcomed with amazement. Flattered, he redoubles his efforts; he is dazzling, his convalescence is compromised. Wonder of wonders, he has that delicious impression—common to so many lovers!—of awakening this young woman to her real self.

The husband comes for week ends. He's a nice chap—a little coarse, but in the old days lovers had the tact to make allowances for the husband. Alfred laughs at his jokes, arranges picnics and fishing parties, entertains the group and lays the foundation for a real friendship. The days pass in euphoria.

The third Sunday, shortly before returning to Paris, Alfred hears a voice under his window:

"Get up, you lazy lout."

It is the husband, bristling with fishhooks, nets, baskets and buckets.

"Colette is tired this morning. She's staying in bed. But what do you say to a little shrimp fishing? With the tide there must be masses of the little beasts. Come on, step on it!"

And off they go among the rocks to scramble in the pools. The husband, full of life, cracks jokes about Operation Shrimp and makes lewd comments on the sex life of shellfish. Alfred laughs heartily.

After two hours the basket is full. The husband stretches himself in the sun and pounds his chest with a contented fist.

"Ah, my friend, just breathe that air. Fill your lungs . . .

come on, deeper than that! . . . It cleans out your insides. Nothing personal, old man, but you need it badly. Ah, those Parisian chests!" He gives Alfred a condescending wallop on the back.

"Old boy, let me tell you something: I'm coming back here next year. It's sensational. Look at the kid: in Paris he won't touch his food, he picks at it, he snivels. Here, he can't eat enough. And Colette! . . . Just between us, huh?, man to man, she's not crazy about . . . Well, you get me . . . To get her to go along with it, there was always a big fuss with begging and yapping. Well, since she's been here, old man, she's a different woman. At first I was flabbergasted: no more migraine headaches . . . no more excuses . . . always ready and willing. And with initiative besides! Sen-sa-tion-al! It's the iodine! Ah! that sea air . . .!"

Alfred admits that he has never been so disagreeably flattered. And yet it's his favorite story. It proves that he was in his day a great technician, a virtuoso of the mechanics of love and that, after all, his present misfortunes are only the decrees of the "distributive justice," which Balzac speaks of and which the plain people call a "bad break." And this justice is not only enlightened but facetious as well. I must tell you that this took place at Perros-Guirec where twenty-five years later Lucien was to meet Marie-Laure. It's true . . . that sea air!

I leave you now to reflect on fortune's moods. I haven't been able to do anything about your dictionaries yet because I can't get Jacques on the telephone. I'm beginning to wonder if he's even in Bordeaux.

As for you, don't sulk like a dunce in your corner: go to the cocktail party. Didier is just what the doctor ordered for you.

Affectionately,
Cécile

P.S. Since little Daniel is with his father these days, ask Florence how things are between Georges and his ex-wife. I'd like to know how the divorce came out; I haven't seen anyone since then and I'd be interested to hear the details.

Friday night

My Sweet,

Your tale with a moral, which ought to have made me angry, made me laugh instead, for I found it under my door on coming home at two in the morning from a night club where Florence and her date took me. By a funny coincidence the story of Alfred alias Don Juan on the beach was the replica of a fake 1900-style film which we had just seen acted out behind a sheet: striped bathing suits, mustaches, nets and creels, jerky motions, back slapping, tripping, hot pursuits and—*allez hop!*—everybody in the same bed! Which means that I read your letter as if watching a Charlie Chaplin film. It made me laugh but it didn't convince me, and I see in it just one more example of injustice to that poor Alfred whose lack of spirit leads me to believe that Marie-Laure doesn't share equitably the benefits of sea air. Besides, I blame Marie-Laure not so much for deceiving her husband as for accusing an innocent party and for being a coward. You don't understand my scale of values.

But here is a more modern anecdote which you requested.

How the very Parisian editor, Georges Robert-Guichard founded, by divorcing his wife, a publishing house . . . I got all the details from Florence who seems to take special pleasure in throwing mud at her family.

Georges was on the verge of a divorce, and as he belongs to a very obliging family, all the fault—or almost all—was on his side. What bothered him most was the marriage

contract calling for separation of property instead of joint property. His father-in-law had insisted on this, using the contract as a sort of cork between two communicating vessels: one empty, our poor Georges; the other, his wife, filled to the brim with personal and estate property.

Georges felt that, under the circumstances, wealth was next to godliness. Shortly after their marriage, and without her foreseeing the consequences, he had persuaded her to put the flat in his name, on the pretext that it was his place of business. The divorce was almost final when he unexpectedly began to put all sorts of obstacles in the way for no apparent reason. One fine day he became conciliating once more, and it was learned at the same time that he had sold to a friend of theirs the seven-room flat and all the furnishings—his wife's furniture is worthy of a museum it seems—for eight million francs.

A few months after the divorce the buyer married the ex-Mme. Geroges Robert-Guichard whom he resettled among her furniture. It becomes evident that the wife was included in the price of eight million! In your opinion, what price did they put on her?

On going to live at his father's, Georges had this to say:

"She should consider herself lucky to have had me to deal with. Another man might very well have sold the flat to just anyone!"

What refinement! Nonetheless, I think that the future of the Robert-Guichard Publishing House is assured.

But that poor woman . . . In her place I would have kept my lover from giving in to Georges's blackmail . . . It's true that she is probably one of those helpless women who are always victims.

There you are. Your family is unbelievably mad.

As for me, I shall go to that electronic cocktail party in order to see Didier and to learn from the remedy what my

disease is, if it is true that he is just what the doctor ordered.

You should be ashamed of yourself, Cécile. You'd do better to find out where Jacques is; are you sure he isn't there? Who would run the factory? It's most irritating—I need those dictionaries.

Meanwhile I'm going to get to work, since I'm not sophisticated enough to play on this blasted planet.

Anyhow, nothing interesting comes my way.

Albertine

P.S. I saw the man at Birnbaum's—completely crazy—who talked to me about theosophy, the sixth level of the sub-race, Katherine Mansfield and Bordeaux, as if it were Shanty Town . . . About Italian, *niente*. Nevertheless, he did ask for a sample of my work and gave me a twelve-page article to translate written by a neo-existentialist on the metaphysical reasons for Cesare Pavese's suicide. Even in my own language I wouldn't understand a word of it.

Monday, October 14

Dear little Albertine,

Don't worry, Jacques is at the factory. He's up to his ears in work. He looks awful, so everything is fine. I got your dictionaries, which I am posting today, hoping you will interpret Italian authors with more insight than you have shown for my cousins' love affairs. You've shed buckets on each of them—which only confirms the theory that we weep more readily about misfortunes of which we are not the cause. I notice you don't waste much pity on the fate of . . . let's say Richard, for example. This proves that you are gifted for social games where each one digests his prey while weeping at the plight of his neighbors . . . You'll survive!

You're going to tell me once more that I don't understand your moral values and that it is a question of form. So be

it . . . Well, my dear, since you like *beaux gestes*, tell me whether you think the one indulged in by Natalie, Georges's ex-wife, that poor "helpless woman always a victim," was worth eight million francs and a divorce . . .

Not possessing your subtle scale of values, I leave it to you to appraise it.

Georges's mistress had been away on a trip for several weeks. Each morning at breakfast Natalie saw in the post a blue envelope which Georges would put in his pocket. Why did Natalie suddenly see red? Nobody knows. The fact remains that one day when Georges was out, Natalie went to his room, rummaged through his desk until she found a packet of letters tied with a string. (Georges, being an editor, always saves love letters addressed to him . . .) She removed the letters from the envelopes, which she threw in the wastebasket, cut each letter very neatly into four, put them in a stack, made a hole with a knitting needle through one corner of the stack, slipped a string through this hole, tying a pretty bow, and then went off to hang this packet of blue papers in that place in the house where solitude induces meditation.

So there were the love letters hanging gaily from their string halfway between the bottle of air-wick and the toilet brush.

Just imagine, darling, the expression on Florence's face (she was visiting her brother with a few cousins) when she went into the place in question and absentmindedly glanced at a paper with these words written on it:

*"My love, I miss you terri
I feel so lonely here and I
your hands all along my*

. . . Picture her, thumbing through the packet, at first incredulously, then nervously, trying to piece the letters

together, hunting for the beginning, "Dearest love, the sun is wonderful," and the end, "When you want me, as you want me, I am yours," and unable to leave without reading just a little more and still a little more.

Picture the maid's face, the expression of "those who already knew" watching "the one who didn't know yet" go in, lying in wait for him to come out. Imagine the general discomfort: everyone looking stealthily at his watch to see how long the other was staying in there, estimating the number of sheets he would be able to read, calculating the number of times he himself had already gone in so as not to give the impression of going too often. Imagine the scruples of the one who entered, determined not to read, and who permitted himself a peep at one sentence, then two, and then read the whole page . . . Imagine this lowly place transformed by the grace of a few love letters into a magnetic pole occupying everyone's thoughts. Think of all those ears strained to hear the flushing which suddenly became the voice of an avenging fatality . . .

But most of all, my dear, think of those love letters, which Georges was perhaps saving for his collection "Women's Great Loves," cut up, crumpled for better absorbency and then following the path, not of literary glory, but the irrevocable one of digestive transmutations!

Natalie was condemned severely—but wasn't her action, which might be considered obscene, in reality sentimental? She loved Georges: isn't it right to throw in the rubbish bin anything which soils a love, even if it's another love? Alas, Georges missed the symbolic beauty of this holocaust. Seeing in it only a stupid and vulgar revenge, he declared:

"Not a single page was saved. I behaved like a gentleman; I didn't interfere. But she is going to pay for it!" I learn from you that he meant this threat literally: eight million francs!

But when everything is said and done, the story seems to have a happy ending. Everyone gets what he most wanted: Georges his business, Natalie her flat, and the third party Natalie—and you, my dear, your Italian translations.

Along with the dictionaries I sent the little lamp (which you liked so much) that was on my desk.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Wednesday

My dear Cécile,

The announcement of so much kindness prevents me from attributing to your kind heart so many unkind thoughts, and I must admit that if you look at the world through the eyes of the elders following the chaste Susanna to her bath, at least you always put these dim secrets to the service of equity . . . thus obtaining some strange results: I can no longer pull down the handle of you-know-what without having the flushing sound awaken in me the realization of my cruelty, of my subconscious depravity and intemperance of judgment! And so I must thank you for transforming into a moral act an act which was up till now beneath notice.

You can see, dear idiot, that I too can make flowery speeches. It's terrifying, by the way, how eloquently you talk in your family. Yesterday Georges kissed me on the neck and said, "I am one of those, Albertine, who believe that disdain for sensations is a form of parricide for the mind . . ."

I told this idiot that he hadn't made that up, to which he replied, "So much the better, for if it's a quote I can repeat it." He then kissed the palm of my hand and walked off.

Yesterday was really Eloquence Day, for in the evening I saw the fox. Not that she talks, the poor thing, but the famous Didier was there. He's really Eloquence personified, that boy! It was his duty to introduce us to the animal which had nothing in common with a fox except the skin, which was placed on some machinery looking like the inside of a wireless set. It moves forward, backward, avoids obstacles by itself, goes toward light or hides itself under furniture at the slightest noise. It appears that these spontaneous movements are due to the presence of a photoelectric cell. I didn't understand a word . . . Briefly, M. Marèze was saying, "You see this machine, well, it knows fear, hunger, desire, hate . . . she is unpredictable, yes . . . unpredictable . . ." and then, Cécile, without any warning he grabbed me by the arm, led me in front of the fox and continued, ". . . as unpredictable as this young lady who perhaps will laugh, perhaps become angry . . . Ah! She is laughing and the fox is backing away . . . Don't move, Madame, I beg of you . . ." and he held on tight to my arm. "You have before your very eyes," he continued, "the dramatic spectacle of a disappearing race face to face with the race of tomorrow. This young woman is the fruit of thousands of years of evolution, she is the product of a civilization which is at its peak today but which is changing and can eventually only disappear. It is a complicated machine, almost perfect: she thinks, she talks, she loves, she reacts according to learned codes, but above all she controls herself . . . Look at her anger, see how well she contains it. It's beautiful, it's Racinian. We are dealing here with a civilized being, one of the last civilized beings: a society woman—prototype of a surviving species. And there before her, at her feet, humble, terrified, uncertain, is the Robot, the machine, tomorrow's Queen, who exceeds our imagination and who will soon be our master . . .

“... and then, Madame, how we shall miss your delightful tyranny!”

Little ballet of curtsies and bows.

Dear Cécile, I didn't know what my reaction should be, when suddenly a big fellow—rather distinguished and fortyish—took my other arm, saying, “To think that that imbecile may be right,” and began barking, “woof, woof, get back to your den.” He was addressing the fox but it might just as well have been me . . . I was resigned. Luckily, there weren't many people there—about twenty—who appeared to be having a good time. Only dear Marie-Laure, who came with me, looked miffed. She said to me, her voice an octave too high: “But, my dear, it's you people came to see, not the fox! Wherever has it gone, poor thing?” Then, turning to the big fellow who was still holding my arm, “I didn't realize you knew Dr. Challenberg.” And to him, “Well now, my dear, are you going to put her in your laboratory in a jar for future generations to study?”

The Challenberg in question answered her smilingly, “Of course, my dear, of course,” and turned his back on her, taking me with him.

He led me into a back room in the bookshop, where there was a second fox. He showed me how it recharged its batteries by plugging itself in—all by itself. The doctor told me that there are analogies between our brains and certain electronic equipment; it seems that in England they are beginning to build machines which can think out problems of political economy. The latest discovery is said to write poetry—but I think he was teasing me.

It would be wonderful, in any case, if they invented a machine to admire men—although living slaves are still very much in demand!

But I'm getting off the subject, dazed as I am by the science and eloquence of those gentlemen. What a day! I

have understood about Didier: my treatment is to be homeopathic and my disease is madness.

Buona sera, signora,

Albertine

P.S. I'm more tired than I have ever been in my life!

Thursday the seventeenth

Darling, I'm surprised that you should meet Challenberg at that cocktail party. I thought nothing interested that individual but his work. I know him well. He is a friend of Didier and my cousin, and we spent two weeks together at Courcheval two years ago. You are lucky that he liked you for he makes a point of being boorish with women. He considers them an utter waste of time. Apart from this detail I have always heard it said that he is an excellent doctor. You should ask his advice about your run-down condition, but don't mention my name because he doesn't like me and thinks I am affected.

That electronic evening is enough to explain your fatigue. It's an overwhelming honor to be chosen as the end product of a civilization. Marie-Laure must have felt more qualified and I can understand her bitterness, which must have been aggravated by a bit of jealousy, if it's true what they say about her relationship with Didier being something more than friendly...

I must leave you now to visit the El Greco exposition which is here in Bordeaux now. I had promised myself not to see it except in Spain but since art nowadays is delivered to our doorstep within reach of everyone's purse, we might as well make the most of it.

Try to rest, Albertine. I don't like to think of you all alone, you're so unreasonable.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Carina mia,

I received the little lamp. The light is soft, the shining copper is comforting, but memories bring a lump to my throat. But thank you for this lovely, too lovely gift.

It's a relaxation to write to you after a day of work; I didn't go out at all. I made some lunch on my alcohol lamp just like a student, but I'm too old to study, work tires me and I'm homesick. Perhaps it's the rain. Perhaps I really am run-down, but everything makes me feel blue.

"Get a hold on yourself, snap out of it," Jacques would say, "you know very well you're like that . . ."

I worked anyway and I translated that long-winded nonsense about Pavese's suicide, the only thing that I found slightly diverting. Look, judge for yourself: ". . . an ego's attempt to dominate while wanting to be sincere in its particularism and at the same time demanding the enjoyment of a totality which eludes possession leads Cesare Pavese to the tragic conclusion that the essence of truth is unattainable; for, as Heidegger said, the allowing to be of the being as such and in totality happens authentically only when, from time to time, it is assumed in its original essence. At this moment the resolved acceptance of the mystery begins to be fulfilled in the center of the drifting perceived as such . . . From this moment is unveiled the origin of the *imbriation* of the essence of truth with the truth of the essence. Such a question poses the disconcerting problem, the equivocation of which has not yet been mastered: the question of the being of being . . . !"

. . . and that is why, Cécile, the voice of our novelist is no longer heard in the land.

Actually—in so far as one can understand the mystery of a soul—Pavese is said to have committed suicide because he couldn't satisfy the women he loved, pleasure preceding

desire. By the way, do you believe, as he says in his diary, that it is a common occurrence? On the other hand, in his novels many a peasant lass moans under the authority of strapping young men . . .

To make me even more depressed, Florence came up for a visit. She is broken-hearted to see her little nephew leave, for Georges can have Daniel only one month out of the year. She started crying and said, "I'll never have any children of my own so I would have liked to bring him up." It was strange to hear that beautiful creature, only twenty years old, say such things! She was weeping too hard for me to ask any questions, and anyway I guard against pity these days.

Ah! Cécile, gloomy weather, gloomy life, gloomy future. I leave you now to go down and type this existentialist jargon on Georges's typewriter. I must let him have it tomorrow.

Thank you again from the bottom of my heart for the lamp and the dictionaries.

Love,
Albertine

P.S. I don't give a hoot for your Didier and your Challenberg. I've better things to do. As for the business of Marie-Laure and Didier, you must be mad! You're forgetting Lucien . . .

Monday the twenty-first

Dear Albertine,

To answer your question about Pavese's misfortune I am going to do as any good bourgeois would: let a classical author do the talking. Here is what Diderot had to say on the subject: "Since Adam's fall one can no longer command all parts of the body as one does the arm, and there are

parts which want to when Adam's son doesn't and which don't want to when Adam's son does . . ."

Alas! . . .

Whatever the case may be, your question does honor to your husband and I can't help wondering, dear Albertine, what you are doing so far from Bordeaux. Of course it's a common occurrence, especially with certain men of letters who imagine so vividly what the sensation will be like that the pleasure is already experienced and past when the object appears on the horizon. Consequently, from that *imbrication* of the truth of the senses and of the sense of the truth, far-sighted women will remember that they should choose lovers devoid of imagination.

It would be amusing to draw up a list of things a lover should not be; it would be seen that mental excesses are to be feared as much as the others. Florence knows this only too well—she who has for a lover a fellow who not only has the disadvantage of a degree from the Ecole Normale Supérieure, but also that of being a communist. Do you know why he won't marry her? Because, he says, he doesn't want to give a child to a member of that decadent bourgeoisie whose suppression will be the first act of the revolution! Poor Florence swallows that as some sort of higher Truth and is grief-stricken to be decadent. "I'm lucky," she told me, "that in spite of the fact that I belong to a corrupt class, Roger is willing to have sexual relations with me so long as they don't fulfil their natural purpose." Poor Florence, the only one in the family with a solid moral outlook, who hates shady situations and compromises, who wants only a normal life with a husband and children; in short, who loves order. What irony of fate made her fall in love with a boy who tortures her in the name of order? —The future order, it is true.

My poor Albertine, nothing ever works out as it should.

Happily, "all flesh is grass" and these iniquities will come to an end. So it is better to laugh and remain green and growing as long as possible.

Tomorrow I get ready for the first party of the autumn season. How I wish you could be here to help me; in other words, to eat the sandwiches as quickly as I make them and to drink the port!

Affectionately,

Cécile

Wednesday morning

Dear Cécile,

I dragged myself to Marie-Laure's big cocktail party; three flights of stairs to go down and, above all, getting dressed—it was a huge chore in my present state of laziness. But I was glad I went for it was a big success. After sordid bargaining, Georges went in with his stepmother and sister and invited a few people, for we all know that "forty can eat as cheaply as thirty." It made a mixture of artists, profiteers of literature, and society people—it was a good mixture as they all make a living from each other. Marie-Laure was all aflutter, gushing with charm and overflowing with sweetness. She was wearing one of those simple little black dresses which undress you at an exorbitant price. But, despite her affectations, she has a sort of Ophelian grace that is hard to resist, and I'm sorry to say I didn't any more than the others. Compared to her, Florence, who is much more beautiful, seemed peevish.

Georges looks more and more like Clark Gable every day. He can thus be insolent and get away with it. With me he is simply a tease and introduces me to his "old friends" as the only woman who gives him a hard time without making up for it with a good time. "This little creature is my

Canossa . . . after resisting her charms I must now humiliate myself before her!" and one word leads to another. You can imagine how quickly it turns into pure nonsense.

I met those two gentlemen again, and I must say they are more tolerable than I had thought. Dr. Challenberg was very nice although he frightened me by saying that I wasn't looking at all well. You know me, I turned pale and admitted that as a matter of fact I wasn't feeling well.

"Don't worry," he said, "I don't think it's anything serious. But still you mustn't play around with your health. Who is treating you?"

"Why, no one."

"Good. Come and see me one of these days and we'll do a blood test. We'll soon see if it's serious or not. Drop in at the laboratory in Rue Taitbout—Marie-Laure can tell you how to get there. Don't bother to make an appointment, you're part of the family, after all." And then, shaking his head, "Ah! these young women . . . you all need someone to look after you!"

He managed to depress me; the minute someone pities me I am overcome with self-pity. I drank three glasses of champagne in three minutes while my future doctor watched me, amused. "With all that," he said, "a strong alcoholic tendency." It was he, however, who replaced the empty glasses with full ones.

As for your Didier, he was amusing for a change.

The party was thinning out, it was late and only about fifteen of us were left. A young woman was holding forth on modern music. "Ah," she said, "concrete music, music by Boulez, by Scheffer, for example, that's the backbone of Nature!"

"Do you know," Didier asked her, "that the Russians are trying to reintegrate this experiment into the classical evo-

lution of musical composition? Are you acquainted with Koscev Androvitch's piano sonata?"

"Wait a minute . . . yes," replied our Miss Know-It-All, hesitating a little, "that name means something to me but . . ."

"Androvitch is one of Khachaturian's students. He's very young and already well-known in Russia but none of his works has been recorded outside Russia."

"Oh, yes, yes . . . yes . . . , but I don't remember the sonata at all."

"All right, listen, my dear, if Marie-Laure is willing I'm going to play it for you."

This was followed by a hubbub of encouragements; everybody was delighted.

Didier sat down at the piano.

The noises that came out of the instrument were dreadful, with a troika rhythm enough to make a whole wedding party end up in the ditch. The audience listened, some—like Marie-Laure—withdrawn into themselves the better to savor such indescribable delights; others with reproving expressions.

At last, after many a screeching discord, Didier stood up: "And now pay special attention to the final chord, for this is where you'll find the true originality of Androvitch." Then very gravely he turned his back to the keyboard and sat down hard on it.

A horrible roar from the piano. Everyone laughed willingly or unwillingly.

Apart from that, nothing new.

If only I'm not ill. But don't worry about me, I'll take care of myself.

Love,

Albertine

P.S. I forgot the best part: I saw Lucien! Horrors! He's

almost bald. It was Alfred who introduced him: "One of our best friends, the well-known lawyer, Lucien X . . ." I wasn't expecting this meeting and I exclaimed, "Oh no!" An embarrassed silence followed so Alfred began to tell the latest one about his grandson. Little Daniel was coming back from the park with his nurse. As he stepped into the apartment building the porter's son, a roughneck about ten years old, said "Is your grandfather still an old ass?"

"I dunno," replied Daniel, "I'll go and ask him."

Alfred told this like a true Englishman; he really has a lot of class. Only Lucien was uncomfortable.

Thursday, October 24

Darling,

Your letter convinced me that I must invite Didier here for the New Year. I would so like to have him sit down on the keyboard in front of a Bordelaise audience: initiatives of this type bring a little breath of fresh wit here to the provinces. But don't feel sorry for us—we too have our distractions, and my cocktail party as such was a success. Around midnight I organized some games so that each one might show off and, my dear, I got the surprise of my life. One of the games consisted of naming as quickly as possible the authors of certain phrases or excerpts from poems, carefully chosen to give every guest a chance to be proud of his own culture. I was the one who got up the list and I had chosen, among others, this phrase: "His rump bends back in twisting folds."

Well now, do you know what Philippe wrote on his paper opposite this verse?

The Kinsey Report.

There is the association of ideas that Théràmène's story evokes today in the mind of a provincial businessman, a

steady chap who, I assure you, does not wander around in the labyrinth of lustful fantasy. What a generation! The day isn't so far off when there will be examination questions in the schools and colleges such as this one: "Discuss the works of Racine from the viewpoint of the sexual behaviour in the human male." Then, my dear, the reign of the electronic fox, predicted by Didier, will not be far away. Perhaps that bluffer is a prophet. But to think that Philippe. . . !

Affectionately,

Cécile

Monday, 2 o'clock

My Cécile,

You are perhaps going to be cross with me but I told Didier about Théràmène-Kinsey. Laughing and smirking together, we became friends. We have discovered a common enemy, that dear Philippe, and nothing brings people closer together. But I must tell you how I became reconciled with your friend.

It was three or four days after Marie-Laure's cocktail party and I had sunk back into my apathy. I was rereading Rosamund Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets*. I wasn't dressed, although it was almost four o'clock. I was lolling around, barefooted, in my dressing gown. The room was a sight. The doorbell rang. Thinking it was the porter, I opened the door. It was Didier returning the bridge table I had lent Marie-Laure.

"Well now! What's the matter?" he asked. "Are you ill?"

"You can see for yourself," I replied, looking around the disordered room as though I had nothing to do with it, as though it had been forced on me by some sly fate.

"You ought to go to bed. Aren't your feet frozen?"

"Oh, no, I think I'm going out. I must see Dr. Challenberg. He wants to count my corpuscles . . ."

"Challenberg? Challenberg! What gave you that idea? First of all, Challenberg is a scientist not a doctor. He'll keep you under observation for ten days and will end up finding you have some rare virus which he'll name after himself, and you'll die before he discovers the serum . . . Believe me, you must be careful. I'm going to treat you myself. Where does it hurt?"

"But it doesn't hurt, I simply have no strength. I can't hold my book."

"I suppose you've had some lunch, at least?"

"Oh, no, it's so boring—three meals a day for a whole lifetime . . ."

"Yes, that's true. But don't you think it would be wise for us to eat something to get strength enough to reduce to nothing the very idea of food? Be nice, set the table for us and, above all, don't try to fix your hair—which is exactly what you'd do the minute I turned my back. I'm going down to the corner café to get the necessary data for study. Wait for me! It will only take fifteen minutes."

What a pity, Cécile, that you didn't marry that boy . . . In short, I too am won over—or is it simply his brown suede sports coat? I did as he had asked and the table was ready when he returned, weighed down with parcels: port, Alsatian wine, eggs in meat jelly—I adore them!—rolls, cakes and an enormous bouquet of chrysanthemums. I was terribly touched. How unpredictable he is! He told me that's the way he is, that he doesn't like people except tête-à-tête. "As soon as three people get together everything is changed," he added, "for the public creates the comedian. What's more, if we try to remain simple and frank, courtesy obliges us to reduce our personality to the lowest common denominator. In a group our mediocrity is thus in pro-

portion to the number of people present. It's a vicious circle and so it is evident that you can be yourself with only one other person. Isn't the couple the human unity?"

After this little speech he told me that he was grateful to my illness for giving him the opportunity to get acquainted with me . . .

Short silences. Looks full of meaning. We swallow our eggs.

He started off again on an admirable speech from which I gathered that the real problem begins with the multiplicity of our ego and the necessity, in order to fulfill one's self, of forming by one's self a series of couples . . . It seems that this has nothing to do with polygamy which is an oversimplification. "But people live like ostriches." Then in a slower voice he added, "I'm talking to you as I would to Cécile. That's all right, isn't it?" Then he informed me that women needlessly complicate the vital dialectic of man whose destiny is to please them. "Cécile must have told you that that is my case," he admitted very simply. "In any event, I have passed the age—I'll be thirty soon—of prudishness and false modesty. Only the structure of things and beings interests me. Anything else is mere diversion. That is why I write so little; so few things are worth saying . . ."

At the moment he is working on only three critical works: "Chekhov's Influence on the Contemporary Theatre"; "Chateaubriand the Humorist"; and a small philosophical essay, entitled "Truth, Here Is the Enemy!" He believes that truth is a myth that can dry up life at its source, since the truth of the moment, once it has been expressed, limits our actions. "Tell the truth," he said to me, "and you will see: the situation can no longer be modified, it is crystallized immediately; it no longer has a future . . . A situation is never final—like a clay vase it can be shaped—but truth is the final baking!"

"But when the vase is pretty," I ventured, "why not bake it?"

"Ah! That's a woman for you," he exclaimed, getting up, "that mania for happiness . . . ! A man never believes that his work can't be improved upon—which proves, my dear, contrary to what everyone believes, that lying is a luxury for woman and a necessity for man!"

On this word he left, elegant, graceful, almost catlike—and delighted, of course, to leave me confused.

And yet I'm beginning to like his type of cynicism, though I'm sure I don't know why because he's disgustingly pleased with himself. Perhaps these are those famous voluptuous pleasures of the mind.

In any case, the port did its work and I'm perking up. It's about time.

No more for now. I'm off to Birnbaum's to see what they've decided.

Love,
Albertine

Tuesday the twenty-ninth

Darling, if Didier is already honoring you with his soliloquies, in a few weeks you'll be "a very Parisian personality." But I'm afraid his interest will soon become more demanding. I don't much like the sound of those verbal and gastronomical orgies. Well, we mustn't look a gift horse in the mouth—and Didier is a gift that many will envy you. Just be sure you don't get your heart mixed up in it; as for the rest . . . let yourself go, it's delightful!

Besides, what could be a nicer fate for a soft lump of clay than to be shaped by expert hands? Praise God you're not already baked—I have suddenly understood the meaning of the expression "he's only half-baked"; this is where

slang meets preciosity—and, really, to be re-shaped from one lie into another, subtle, unpredictable and always pliable, for a woman that's real happiness . . .

But watch out: hang on to your heart!

Yours, Cécile

Wednesday, October 30

Cécile! I'm thrilled; that crackpot at Birnbaum's, after telling me that judging from my general characteristics I was probably only on my first or second reincarnation—that is to say, very low on the human ladder—that old loon commissioned me to check all the Italian translations which are not done by well-known authors. The work will be boring, perhaps, but the pay is good. Georges was there to see to that. I wanted to tell you the good news right away because it's thanks to you that my stay in Paris is beginning to take shape.

Now I must run. Didier, undoubtedly to speed up my future evolution, wants to show me the famous stained-glass windows on exhibition at the Marsan Pavilion.

Don't write me any more of your foolishness if you want me to go on liking you.

Your Albertine

P.S. Marie-Laure, distressed by my illness, has given me an azalea . . . What's your opinion? Don't you think I'm the one who should offer her flowers?

Thursday

Dear little Albertine, the azalea is surely the prelude to some favor to be asked of you—like all cannibals, Marie-Laure is an old hand at bartering! What is more, as a woman of the world she watches over her interests like a hawk, and

she means to have her bread returned unto her. At one time, when I was interested in Chinese art, she sent me a reproduction of an engraving—it was very pretty but quite valueless. It was followed a month later by a request for a barrel of our best wine. Of course, there was no question of money in the exchange so I lost out all the way round, because, in addition to the wine, Marie-Laure took this opportunity to look down her nose at me. When friends and guests praised the wine she would say: "Yes, it's my cousin Cécile's; I gave her some beautiful Chinese engravings and, to thank me, she sent a barrel of wine—very good wine, you must admit—" all this with a little smile as though to excuse herself for being related to country bumpkins who measure by the quart the quality of a work of art. She was so successful that for those who didn't know me I became "Your cousin Cécile . . . ? Oh yes, the one who sent the nice little Bordeaux wine."

So watch out, Albertine, and if you let Marie-Laure harvest the fruit from the flowers she gave you, be sure it is sour.

Adieu, my little lioness. That man at Birnbaum's is right: not so very long ago you must have been playing with gazelles and eating them out of love. But beware of big lions!

Affectionately,

Cécile

P.S. I'm happy that it went so well with Birnbaum—
Bravo.

Sunday evening

You're a real Cassandra, Cécile: Marie-Laure has already begun dunning me for the azalea. It's an expensive plant, as you shall see.

The dear lady came up this morning, ostensibly to see if the rose of the azalea matched my lampshade. "I chose it so carefully among hundreds of others, but with such uncer-

tainty and regret for, my dear, as Gide said, "To choose is an impertinence." "

And off she went on a series of her sticky-sweet phrases as only she knows how, which began with her soul's suffering and ended with more practical considerations such as the idiocy of servants and the price of beef. Meanwhile, she stretched out on my bed, I served a little port and we made conversation about the necessity of reaching, through constant effort, a higher form of spiritual life.

"But you see," she said, "to do that one must be able to have moments of real solitude . . . Don't you agree that one must be alone with one's self at times to get back to the structure of beings and things, really the only worth-while preoccupation . . . ?"

While reflecting on the source of this eloquence, I pretended out of politeness to sympathize with her. She then sketched a heartbreaking picture: she is harassed, she is torn between Alfred and the servants, between Georges and Florence, she never has a moment's respite.

"You don't know how lucky you are, dear Albertine, to have a little home all to yourself. To be frank with you, I had intended to make of this little attic room a refuge where I could slip away to read, dream, work. I was tempted to take up painting again—those wet-grey slates under the blue sky at twilight—what a balm for the soul! But, of course, when Cécile asked me to take you in, I gave up my own projects."

I immediately protested that I could look for another room, that. . . No, never! She loved me (the snake!); she would do anything for me; she was so grateful to me for consenting to have a few meals with them; she even spoke of my charm!

"Your gay nature is such a comfort to me. If you knew how unpleasant mealtimes are with all that hostility around

me. How many times, on seeing you come down pink-cheeked and refreshed, I have wanted to ask you permission to go and lie down for an hour in your room while you were all at lunch, particularly since I am a bother to everyone . . . No, don't deny it, it's true, alas!"

I wasn't denying it; I was thinking how happy Florence would be to be rid of her stepmother and I exclaimed that I would be happy to let her use my room.

Fatal words! The smug expression which spread over her face opened my eyes, but too late as usual. Marie-Laure was already kissing and thanking me for my generous offer which she would accept because "it was too sweet for words." It was all decided: as I was going to work at Birnbaum's for a time, she would come to my room every afternoon with her water-colors.

"It will be fun to have our little secret, dear," and she added: "Oh yes, when you leave would you put the key under the mat. I can't work well unless I can lock myself in. Well, till Monday then. And thank you so much, my dear."

She went off, oozing with tenderness, after giving me to understand that it was only fair that I offer her the pleasures of solitude since she gave me in her home the pleasures of company. She was fairly overcome by the charm of reciprocal charity.

I was stunned by this new misfortune and thought Lucien a cad not to supply the love nest himself. I was so vexed that I almost told Didier about it when he came in this afternoon for tea. However, out of consideration for you, I did not reveal your family's disgraceful conduct. He undoubtedly knows quite a lot already but he is just as discreet as I am. You know, we're becoming quite good friends. He often comes up to chat and he's beginning to lose his pedantic manner, probably realizing that I am not impressed by his intellectual gibberish but that I do enjoy

seeing him. He's so charming when he lets himself go: he seems almost human. Yesterday, walking back home—we had had dinner in a little restaurant behind Notre-Dame—he said, "If I could see you more often, Albertine, I think I could make friends with myself . . ." and then broke off pensively.

You know him—do you think he's bluffing? Is he capable of sincerity? Please answer me seriously, for once, without any of your libertine comments which are amusing but not instructive. I'm furious: he invited me to come to his home the day after tomorrow to listen to recordings of atonal music but, unfortunately, I am going out that night with Richard, who has bought tickets for a revival of *Le Cid*. That boy really has no sense of timing. One would think that his mission in life is to ruin mine. Oh, well, with a little luck he may fall ill in the next twenty-four hours.

As you can see, I'm optimistic these days.

Good night, my Sweet.

Albertine

Tuesday, November 5

Dear Albertine, in spite of the experience I have had, Marie-Laure's double-dealings will never cease to surprise me. If I were you I'd tell Florence about it. Since she can't invite Roger to have tea in her room without raising the roof, your story might renew her ideas.

As for Didier, I don't believe there is any hurry to bring him up to date on your difficulties with Marie-Laure. You would put him in an awkward position and it's not the moment, believe me. But I learn from your letter that Didier Marèze is not on speaking terms with Didier Marèze . . . That's something new. Well, see him more often: for this type of man the best way to make peace with oneself is

to look in a mirror. And what more charming mirror, my Albertine, than your wide-eyed admiration? That is undoubtedly the meaning of this formula—so unoriginal—that you quote with a quivering pen. You must be the other half of one of those couples whose multiplicity makes up the human unity . . .

Au revoir, querida, in such a situation the best way not to slip into libertine comments is to be silent. And that's what I'm doing.

Affectionately,
Cécile

Saturday the ninth

Dear Cécile,

I haven't written for several days because I hadn't the courage to tell you about my latest adventures, which some people might, at first glance, call misadventures. But how could I live without telling my alter ego everything.

"Oh, oh!" you're thinking, "Albertine is trying to white-wash her latest escapade . . . !"

We'll see. First of all, I must tell you that it was raining in Paris that day, that the buses and metro were on strike, that my daily woman hadn't come, that for several nights I had slept on a divan reeking of Marie-Laure's perfume, and worst of all, I had refused an evening at Didier's in order to go to the Comédie-Française with Richard to hear Corneille's poetry slaughtered . . .

Enter Richard. Electric blue pin-stripe suit, garnet-red tie, white handkerchief in his pocket—a walking fourteenth of July in the middle of November. He was a living anachronism. To brace myself, I served some port—Didier's—and we were off.

Halfway down the stairs Richard announced, as though

it were the most natural thing in the world, that the "little pannar" had had a breakdown. He chose a perfect day for it...

"But," he assured me, "we'll find a cab. Don't worry."

I didn't worry. I knew that between the strike and the rain we wouldn't find a cab.

"Yes, I suppose so," he said, "but you know, there are a few trains running, especially since seven o'clock..."

"Trains?"

"Of course, the tube, what else?"

I was speechless with shock. He dragged me all the way to the Bellechasse station.

Naturally, he hadn't bought any tickets. We queued up at the ticket office, at the gate, on the platform. Finally we squeezed into a coach.

Once inside, probably because of the smell, the jolts, the lack of air—horrible reminders of the Occupation—I got panicky in the midst of the crowd. I had an overwhelming desire to get away at any price, to escape from the foolishness and the boredom, from my own weakness, from Richard, from Corneille . . . I would have sold my soul to the devil—who must have heard me.

Richard and I were standing, squeezed against a rather tall, fat woman who had her back turned to us. At each shift in the crowd, my hands, in spite of myself, touched her plump roundness . . . and that is how, dear Cécile, a means of salvation dawned on me. I began cautiously, then grew bolder until I was giving firm, determined strokes. Well, my dear, no reaction at all . . . I couldn't believe my hands. Indignant and determined to have done with it, at the Solferino station I pinched her bottom, having chosen a plump spot beneath her girdle. I squeezed with a vengeance.

It had just the effect I had expected. The good woman—

about forty years old—turned on Richard like a fury: “Ah! you little skunk, I’ve had my eye on you for quite a while now; aren’t you ashamed, a dirty trick like that, at your age! . . . Oh, no! You keep your mouth shut, pig, pig, dirty pig . . .” all the while pounding his head, using her hand-bag as a pestle because of the lack of space.

It was irresistible, particularly when she addressed the crowd: “What did he do? . . . What did he do? Why can’t you see he’s a sadist? He pinched my behind . . .”

When we escaped from her wrath and found ourselves on the platform at the Concord station, Richard’s face was a spectacle I couldn’t even begin to describe. Yet I controlled myself and said to him: “Richard, I understand, but you might have waited until you were alone,” and I was out the door in a flash.

I know it’s an unspeakably dirty trick, but I would have had a fit of hysterics if I had stayed with him twenty seconds longer.

Fifteen minutes later—for *I* was able to find a cab—I reached Didier’s in a state of over-excitement which you can readily picture.

When I arrived Georges grabbed me by the waist, singing:

*Many’s the night I spent
With Minnie the Mermaid
Down at the bottom of the sea.*

and because everything seemed sparkling and gay, I answered:

*Minnie lost her morals
Down by the corals
Gosh, but she was good to me!*

We danced like mad and kept that pace up the whole evening. Impossible to hear atonal music. Each attempt was

drowned under the noise of glasses and bottles, someone imitating a rooster, a young Russian hitting his head with his shoes. Didier and Georges insulted each other terribly. It was wonderful.

When everyone had left, Didier turned to me and said very seriously: "Albertine, you spoiled my party; you acted like a half-wit but I'm happy for you are here . . ." and saying this, he took me in his arms, picked me up gently and put me on the divan. He knelt on the floor beside me and with a gracefulness I shall never forget he kissed me.

Oh Cécile, what a wonderful kiss, what a feeling of purity, of calm after that evening. He was so nice: "Don't move, don't say anything, don't be afraid, I only want to look at you. You look like a little girl . . ." And he looked at me . . . he also kissed me a lot.

Cécile, it was so lovely that you should admire me for having the will power to make him take me home. Happily, his car wasn't out of order.

There you are. I'm dead. I can't rest. I haven't heard from him—but I have received a note from Richard begging me "to believe him . . ." I wrote that "he was forgiven."

I'm not ashamed, I'm so happy!

Don't write too many unpleasant things, please.

Albertine

P.S. I've reopened my letter because I've just received an enormous bunch of red tulips and, on the card, a few musical notes and the words "for a concert missed" . . .

Tuesday

My little Albertine,

Your exploits leave me wondering. To be able to play, with only a two-hour interval, the satyr and the nymph shows a flexibility of character which I don't know whether

to attribute to the benefits of Parisian life or to excesses of passion? I congratulate you in either case. But you don't tell me which of the games you enjoyed the more: pinching fat ladies' bottoms in the tube or falling into the arms of men of letters?

Don't forget, darling, for nymphs the pleasure is in the fall, always followed by tears, alas . . .

You see, like the Greek chorus, I celebrate the present happiness of the heroine while bemoaning her future misfortunes. But, since only the present counts, and since the present is happy, I rejoice in it and send you my love.

Cécile

P.S. But, I repeat, watch out: hang on to your heart.

Thursday the fourteenth

My dear Cécile:

It's *St. Martin's summer*. Paris, all along the quays, is bathed in a golden light which softens and blends the colors. How I love this city, how pleasant and gay it is with the last grapes and first chestnuts. I don't feel like working but I must come to an agreement with various translators about the deadlines for their work to be ready. I'm beginning to understand why that theosophist gave me this job. I had thought it was out of friendship for Georges—in reality, half the translators scarcely know Italian and not a word of French. Right now I'm going over a serial story where I find these gems: "Bruno, elegant and sure of himself, entered to gab with the boss and to tell him his surprise that he didn't remember nothing about their conventions . . ." It was so awful that I pointed out that if Bruno was sure of his elegance he was less sure of his syntax.

They appeared a little bothered at Birnbaum's and asked me to fix it up—that is to say, rewrite it entirely. Strange

firm. They'll go bankrupt at this rate. But Didier told me I shouldn't try to understand, that a publishing house is a depot for intrigomania . . . !

I don't want to understand anyway. I have better things to think about than Birnbaum's problems.

Didier comes to fetch me almost every evening to make me get some fresh air and I love our walks, arm in arm. He tells me that, thanks to me, he feels eighteen again. Judging by my heart I can easily believe him.

Yesterday he took me to Rue Bourg-l'Abbé to track down a little seamstress who lived over three centuries ago and who was loved successively by Field Marshal de Bassompierre . . . and, two hundred years later, by Chateaubriand. He told me it was a pilgrimage he had promised himself as soon as he arrived in Paris. Six years have gone by since he left Bordeaux without his having had the time, the inclination or the courage to seek out his seamstress.

It's a long story that he told me in the maze of narrow streets in the Temple district, the very streets "which saw Gavroche die at the foot of their hovels" (says the Blue Guide Book) which are still more dirty than picturesque. Briefly, you know how much he likes Chateaubriand. He had read in *Mémoires d'Outretombe* that his beloved René, on arrival in Paris, deplored, like any young man, the easiness of his century and began to daydream about love in olden times when a man risked his life. He told the story of Field Marshal de Bassompierre who, crossing the Pont Neuf every day, noticed a young seamstress in a shop called "Les Deux Anges"; she smiled and curtsied. He obtained a rendezvous, and the lady, young and pretty in a little blouse and stiff green skirt, charmed him greatly. He asked to see her again. She invited him to come the next day to her aunt's, Rue Bourg-l'Abbé, second floor, the third house in the direction of the Rue St. Martin. The Marshal went to

this address in blissful anticipation. He found the house brightly lit. A little astonished, he knocked. A man's voice asked him what he wanted. Taken aback, he beat a retreat.

He returned a few minutes later and this time found the door open. He went up to the second floor and knocked. No answer: he opened the door and found before him an unexpected sight: two naked bodies, a man and a woman, lying on a table and a mattress burning on the floor. He ran down the stairs and collided with undertakers entering the house.

There is no explanation and nothing more was ever learned. "I love," said Didier, "these dramas pregnant with mystery; the imagination feeds on what escapes it. In seeking out the scene of that tragedy, Chateaubriand already possessed that spiritual sensuality which seeks at any cost amorous sensations . . . It's a temptation," he added, squeezing my arm, "that happiness alone can cure . . ."

Text in hand, and very moved, we went up the Rue St. Denis until we came to Bourg-l'Abbé, looking for the address given by Bassompierre three hundred and fifty years before: the third small door on the way to the Rue St. Martin.

My disappointment was great, for the house has nothing of the Middle Ages about it, but Didier went into raptures: before his eyes was a building constructed under the Directory, the very one which the young Chateaubriand had discovered when he wrote regretfully: "the façade is modern."

I grew dizzy before this flight of centuries. But Didier, overjoyed, kissed me. Suddenly he became sad and exclaimed, "But the wig maker, where is the wig maker?" During the Revolution it seems that there was a barber shop there which sold wigs. Today there are only the Hachette Shipping Company and a small dry goods shop. We went up a filthy staircase to the second floor. We passed Richard

Convert's Shoes and arrived in front of a lingerie manufacturer, "Pierrette Diapers." Disenchanted—as if we had hoped to see the corpses and the burning mattress—we fell silent.

"In any case," I said at last, "it's not the same house . . ."

Luckily, when we returned to the street, we saw a shop window opposite which amused us with its notice. I copied it for you:

GUERBOIS BATHS
STEAM BATHS IN POOL
TURKISH and RUSSIAN BATHS
SULPHUR and MEDICINAL BATHS
BATHS IN YOUR HOME!

Cheered up by this, we continued walking straight ahead. Fate, undoubtedly touched by our good will, offered us, further on, what we were seeking: an authentic and lovely XVth century house—the home of Nicolas Flamel and Pernelle, his wife—which, wonder of wonders, has remained the tavern it was long ago. We went in.

We were so pleased by this discovery that we couldn't stop looking at each other; we were forgetting to order dinner.

It was, however, Clamart sweetbreads that made us decide that Bassompierre must have supped here.

"How do you think they died?" Didier asked me all of a sudden.

I had almost forgotten about the story so I hesitated . . .

"Her lover," he said, "must have caught her waiting, so he waited with her and when he saw Bassompierre he killed her."

"Perhaps, but why was the mattress burning?"

"To make it look like the plague. Maybe he wasn't even dead?"

From there we went on to see if we would kill ourselves for love . . . how we loved, how we suffered . . . our hearts . . . life . . . the world . . . men . . . women . . . Oh, dear Cécile, we said such pretty things—and into the small hours of the morning.

It was lovely walking home under a pale sky. We managed to slip into the Tuilleries Gardens. Didier held me so tight against him I no longer know what we said . . . We came home, intoxicated and giddy from so much talk and so much madness. "Albertine," he said, "I swear to you that I never behave like this with young women . . ." You'd think he was excusing himself for his restraint.

How wrong he is, dear Didier! I have such a need of confidence and purity.

Good-by, my Cécile, forgive me for rambling on.

Love and kisses,

Albertine

Monday morning

Cécile, everything I wrote you no longer makes any sense: I found one of the suede buttons from Didier's sports coat behind my divan! So it was he Marie-Laure brought up here every day, on my bed, before he came to fetch me for dinner!

I have never felt so humiliated and ridiculous—the abyss of human deceit nauseates me.

Under such conditions you can understand why I have become Dr. Challenberg's mistress.

If you have a heart, and I hope you have, don't try to explain away the disgraceful conduct of that individual who reduced me to such an act of despair.

Albertine

P.S. It's over, all over with Didier. I sent him the proof of his caddishness along with a bunch of red tulips. On the card—musical notes and these words: "For a missing button."

But I scarcely feel better for it.

Tuesday the nineteenth

Dear Albertine,

This time I give up. I don't know which makes me sadder—your distress or the incoherence of your reactions. His behavior is, of course, peculiar but how could you not see what was so obvious even at a distance? Believe me, that affair had nothing to do with Didier's heart and you were in the process, without realizing it, of putting things back in order. The "vital dialectics" of a much sought-after man is sometimes demanding. I was hoping that it would come to an end before you had time to find out about it.

But to make a mountain out of a button and then to announce, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, that you have become Challenberg's mistress indicates a mental confusion which is disturbing. Your uncontrolled impulsiveness is beginning to worry me. Challenberg is the worst possible choice. He's forty years old, he's a doctor, he's married. Please, Albertine, don't embark on a risky adventure like that. "Lose yourself well if lose yourself you must."

I await your letter.

Cécile

Thursday, November 21

You're right, dear Cécile, to scold and advise me. Everything happened so quickly I'm in a daze. It seems like a

story someone told me and not something that happened to me.

So I found that blasted button behind my bed last Thursday. I had just been with Didier, we had had dinner in our little Nicolas Flamel inn and had spent a pleasant evening in front of the wood fire. I don't know if you can imagine what a shock that discovery was for me. Anger and rage alone saved me, for at first my pride suffered more than my heart. I don't know whether I slept or not: my plans for revenge resembled dreams. In any case, in the morning I could hardly stand up. You have no idea how much I needed your presence.

After swallowing some sort of gruel I sent the daily woman to Birnbaum's to let them know I wouldn't be coming in. I went to sleep; I must have slept ten hours. I found a florist's shop still open and sent a bouquet to that fine gentleman. Then I had dinner all alone in a little restaurant in the Rue de Beaune. There I began to reflect, that is to say, suffer.

You accuse me of lacking insight. I don't think that's true . . . but how could I believe what I feared at first: Didier and Marie-Laure . . . since you had just told me about Lucien? I admit that I dismissed from my mind the idea of a possible affair between those two monsters, using what I considered elementary common sense.

Anyway, I decided never to see Didier again and to refuse the use of my room.

Saturday morning I went to the Robert-Guichards'. In the entry Georges and Alfred were playing with an electric train they had just had sent from England for Daniel. A touching sight but it wasn't the moment for it—even less the moment for Georges's buffoonery, complaining that he never saw me any more, bellowing with a hand on his stomach, "No, never will mute suffering open the door of a

heart . . . and I am not one of those crocodiles of seduction whose tears lure its victims!" You can imagine how untimely it was!

I asked immediately to see Marie-Laure. The maid asked me to wait.

I was astonished to find Marie-Laure in her room, disheveled and in tears.

"Oh, my darling," she says to me, "come and console me . . . They are all monsters in this house . . . Don't ask me any questions. There are trials in life that a woman must face in silence out of self-respect."

You can imagine my conflicting feelings. Marie-Laure was much too preoccupied with herself to notice my confusion. She was developing—between sobs—the theme of human solitude mixed with the flight of time and the fragility of things of this world . . . I must have been more affected than I had thought because I felt only secret joy at her despair and no curiosity. I was sickened and wrapped in scorn. I didn't even tell her the reason for my visit. To get my room back I had prepared the excuse of the unexpected arrival of a friend from Bordeaux. I mumbled some vague expressions of sympathy and fled.

The two men were still squatting by the train. Marie-Laure's despair didn't seem to bother anyone.

Puzzled, I went back up to my attic room—life seemed suddenly very difficult. I went back to sleep.

Around three o'clock I woke up feeling unbearably nauseated. For someone like you, interested in the origin of slang, let me point out that the expression "I can't stomach him" can sometimes be taken very literally . . . Well, I'll spare you the unpleasant details . . . and I went back to bed. I felt a little better in the evening so I dragged myself to the Milk Bar on Boulevard Saint-Michel, where I swallowed some soup, and then went to the movies to see the

latest Peter Cheyney. The fighting cheered me up but I sank into fresh melancholy at this proof of my limited ability to suffer. I had reached that point of saturation where indifference begins. I went back to bed again and woke up unable to sleep any longer. I decided to "snap out of it" and on the dot of noon I went to your cousins'. Alas, Lucette, the maid, announced that Alfred and Florence were at Mass . . . and that Marie-Laure was in bed with a bad migraine headache which began yesterday.

I ate lunch all alone in a café in the neighborhood, and as it was drizzling, I went back to my room and started a thorough housecleaning.

Around four o'clock I couldn't stand it any longer and I went downstairs again to see if Georges and Florence were there. Nobody at home. I could have wept. But just at that moment I bumped into a tall man coming up the stairs as I was going down: Challenberg!

That's how it happened.

*Povera, orfana, zitella,
Senza cugini carnali!
Mà per far la to vindetta
Sta siguru, vasta anche ella*

That's Corsican for "I got my revenge."

I haven't seen him since; I stay locked in my room.

Saturday the twenty-third

Albertine, from your long letter I learn that in your despair you slept, ate, digested unsatisfactorily, slept some more, ate lightly, slept again and eventually ate well!

After which you apparently slept with Dr. Challenberg on the stairs. Bravo. But one detail escapes me: finally, as I understand it, you killed someone?

I won't write to you again before knowing whom.

Calm down, Albertine. The whole thing is absurd but not irreparable.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Monday the twenty-fifth

It's easy for you to joke after having thrown me yourself into the wolf's mouth! I'm glad you can be so unconcerned, and since it amuses you to "have all the details," after all I don't give a hoot. Besides, I don't give a hoot about anything any more.

Thus I was on the stairs.

I was going down.

Challenberg was coming up.

We collided. He grabbed me by the waist and turned me round to face the light.

"You're looking terrible," he said. "Let me look at you, you're yellow . . . !" and without further ado he looked at the whites of my eyes.

I learned that I have sub-hepatic trouble and that I must be careful of my liver.

Romantic atmosphere if ever there was one.

"Each time I see you," he said, "you look like a lump of papier mâché. Are you always like that?"

I grumbled that it didn't matter, that nothing mattered, that . . .

"Why haven't you come to my laboratory?" he interrupted.

I replied that I was ready to do so when Didier . . .

"Ah, yes, I see, it's Didier who is doctoring you . . . Well, don't congratulate him for me."

He then announced that he had to see Marie-Laure.

"Her husband asked me to call in this afternoon; it seems she's not well?"

"Pooh! It can't be very serious, I saw her yesterday—she was weeping over the falling leaves of autumn..."

"Ah! I'm afraid you're wrong, my dear child, that's a dangerous symptom for a thirty-five-year-old woman to have." And he said in that clipped voice I like so much, "I hope at least that it's not our friend Didier who is treating her too!"

I blushed and told him he wasn't funny. I had tears in my eyes.

"Oh, you little fool!" he exclaimed, "... you women are all alike ... ! Look, be a good girl, wait a moment and I'll take you out for a drink."

He made me sit down in an armchair in the living room and twenty minutes later he came back to me, scolding, "I don't know what's wrong with you women but if we men made as much fuss ..." and I learned that our Marie-Laure, who certainly never denies herself anything, had had a little nervous breakdown.

The dear doctor seemed preoccupied when he helped me into his car.

"Are you sad?" I asked.

"No, but it's nice of you to worry," and he put his hand on mine. "I'm tired, *I* work. Sadness is a luxury. You see, I can't even take it easy on Sunday ... you women with all your little problems, I'd like to have time to take care of them ... Well now, what shall we do?" he asked.

Thinking he regretted his invitation, I announced that I was going back home.

"Oh, no, please don't," he pleaded ... "you know what would be nice? You'd let me make one last call—it would only take an hour—and then we could have dinner together. I must go home because I have a patient who isn't doing at

all well so I may get a phone call . . . so, if that's all right with you, we can have dinner at my home—but since you're so dead tired I'm going to get you settled down first."

He started the car and drove me to his home on the Boulevard Raspail.

I didn't say a word. I was comfortable with this man who knew how to take care of a woman without asking her opinion.

He took me into his office and made me comfortable on his couch.

"I'll be back in an hour or an hour and a half; sleep. We'll talk about that liver when I get back."

I didn't sleep but for the first time since I discovered the button, I felt comforted. Perhaps it was the Sunday silence or the strange and yet familiar house with the smell of ether and alcohol which reminded me of my grandfather's office . . .

When Challenberg returned I told him about this impression and he seemed delighted.

"I didn't take long, eh?" he said, "I gave the good man such a shot in the buttock he howled . . . but I was in a hurry to get back to a little peace and quiet with you." He tidied the room, lit a fire in the fireplace and set a table for our dinner.

"Don't move," he ordered. "Everything is in the refrigerator; my wife is away so I manage as best I can."

Nothing was more reassuring and cosy than our simple dinner in front of the fire.

"Well now, about this Didier," he asked me abruptly, "do you love him?"

I said I did.

"Oh! Good Lord! If that isn't smart . . . do you like all that blabbing? . . . Oh! you people have time to waste . . . !"

I protested and praised—why not?—Didier's intelligence

and his pleasant company. So the good doctor, with a mixture of allusions, unfinished sentences and innuendos as delicate as an ocean cable, gave me to understand that Didier was nothing but a degenerate, a chronic psychopath, an oral author and a living-room Don Juan. . . .

Ah! Those dear good friends.

A little Mozart raised our souls to a more worthy plane and we talked of life, its disappointments, its banal routine . . . A long, uninteresting conversation drawn out in front of the fire.

It was late, after midnight. Challenberg yawned but I didn't care, I didn't feel obliged to be ladylike with this doctor whom I didn't think of as a man, but I liked that house where I could complain and be pampered.

"Here we go, I'll drive you home now," he stated.

"Oh no! Not yet, in five minutes when the log has burnt out . . ."

He laughed and went to get me some orange juice. I had been sitting cross-legged on the carpet so he brought me a little cushion so that I could lie down. Now I was perfectly comfortable.

I didn't move when he stretched out beside me. He didn't either. I liked the smell of ether and after-shave lotion about him. It seemed normal, simple, natural to lie in the arms of this stranger who was neither young nor handsome and who talked like everyone else.

Suddenly he tipped over my glass and swore.

"Up with you, on your feet," he ordered, "you're not comfortable there," and he carried me into his bedroom and lay me across a double bed. After a quick kiss I recall hearing this astounding phrase:

"Come now, get undressed, but hurry please. We've wasted enough time as it is . . ." Cécile, I must have been sleepwalking . . . for I got undressed!

When he came back from the bathroom I had already slipped into bed and I was naked . . . I was immediately caught up in a network of motion, words and gymnastic exercises—a technical ensemble so new to me that I felt nothing but the virtuosity of this hurricane. But this didn't affect the dear doctor's sense of precision and he never stopped asking, enunciating his words carefully:

"Do you like that? . . . Tell me? . . . And there? . . . There? . . . Tell me? Like that? Yes? Do you prefer . . . No?"

And to think, Cécile, that the telephone bell or the slightest sound is enough to inhibit me! I lay passive in his arms, completely flabbergasted. These frenzied sessions were interrupted from time to time for rest periods during which he asked me to call him André and to put my head on his shoulder.

At last I had a right to a few compliments such as:

"You're round, you're firm . . . you're edible! . . . And you see, my darling, you *are* healthy, you are in excellent physical condition."

As I had never before received compliments in bed on my state of health, I admit that out of this memorable evening nothing—neither the unexpected names of endearment nor his extraordinary technical display—nothing astounded me as much as to learn that I was healthy! . . .

The night ended nicely. I left around five in the morning "to avoid meeting the maid" . . . my lover having very gallantly explained where to find a taxi stand.

It was dark and I enjoyed the walk through the quiet of the city. I was happy to get back to my little room.

I had completely forgotten about Didier.

He reminded me of his existence, however, by the two letters I am enclosing which he must have posted Saturday night. You can be the judge of his methods. Poor Marie-Laure . . . In any case, his insolence helped me the next

day to be less bothered by the memory of the preceding night.

Now you know everything. For the time being I am not at home to anyone and I'm working.

Love,
Albertine

Didier's Letter to Albertine:

Dear Albertine, your flowers are lovely, and never has a young woman insulted me more graciously . . .

I could tell you that you were able, in order to punish me for having been the accomplice in an indelicate situation, to find the cruelest way . . . I could also tell you that your offence is added to mine but doesn't cancel it . . . But life is such that we must let our actions be scorned by others or consent to explain and justify them endlessly. I have always chosen to be scorned but you are so young, so touching, so blundering, that I will explain to you later how one goes from the past to the future, for not possessing opposite faces like Janus, we must invent our future roads. Yet I'm not displeased that the adieu takes place at the moment when hope was growing and I like to think that your inconsiderate action, while forbidding my love, nonetheless assures me that it would not have been unwelcome.

Adieu then, dear Albertine, I find you are one of those beings who sacrifice their heart for the pleasure of making a magnificent gesture, so to please you . . . just to see . . . because you are a woman and the humiliation of another woman must put a bloom on your cheeks . . . for no reason . . . for the absurdity of it all . . . I sent a note to Marie-Laure, a copy of which is enclosed herein.

Didier

To Madame Alfred Robert-Guichard:

Whether it be the autumn days when that which was once a bud, then flower, then fruit, dries up and returns to earth . . . or the burden of All Souls' Day and its chrysanthemums . . . don't you agree, dear, that all good things must come to an end, that there is a harvest time for pleasure also and that the heart like the ground must lie fallow? Winter is a dry season when the soul should withdraw into solitude, skepticism and meditation on passing time. Let us humbly surrender ourselves to the law of the seasons.

It only remains for me to thank you, my dear, for having given to this last spring the charm it demanded. I pay tribute to you for it and I am, dear friend, at your capricious service.

Your Didier

Thursday the twenty-eighth

It must be true, Albertine, that each one recreates the world according to his own image, for around you everything becomes paradoxical and illogical. Such is candor's reward: where the intelligence contracts beings and things, a candid look restores them to their natural state, the raw product, in that comic and arbitrary perspective where it becomes natural for you to find yourself in Challenberg's bed because you don't consider him a man and, where having carried you off to treat you, he ends up marveling at your healthiness.

I myself feel very reassured . . . Besides, the precision of Challenberg's treatment will put you back on your feet—we are such annoyingly biological creatures!—But I am weak enough to prefer living-room Don Juans to laboratory Don Juans, oral authors to technicians of directed pleasures. Challenberg ought to know that it isn't fitting to ask the

patient how he wants the dose administered. You accuse me of throwing you into the wolf's jaws . . . unfortunately, you got the wrong wolf. Mine gobbles up his victims with more talent.

The fact remains that no talent in the world permits you to foresee the insolence of events, and Didier—who likes to find the relationship between things, who proclaims that with every act you pledge yourself, that every word counts—has verified at his own expense the truth of his theories; for his orgy of fruits and flowers, by setting off Marie-Laure's tears, made Challenberg appear on the stairs just as surely as if Didier had taken him by the hand and led him to you.

All that because of a badly sewn button . . . which proves once more that our fate hangs by a thread.

But don't overdo the tightrope walking.

Affectionately,
Cécile

Saturday, November 30

My Cécile,

At first I went back to work happily after those interludes but I'm beginning to be fed up with that translation. Even the original Italian text is stupid.

I was so discouraged the other day that, in spite of your good advice, I almost paid a visit to the dear doctor. Surprised undoubtedly not to see me come running, or feeling remorseful—how should I know?—he had sent me flowers and a box of candy with this note: "The candy is for the little girl and the flowers for the charming lady whom I await, when she so desires, at my laboratory after six o'clock."

I'm used to being treated like a child by these gentlemen

and it wasn't that which held me back. It was rather the impossibility of being natural when entering his office and, most of all, laziness at having to explain why I hadn't kept our date which, out of weariness, I had accepted the other night as I left him. I didn't even write to let him know . . .

I forgot to tell you that I am becoming apathetic. I now have only the joys and sorrows of old people.

In this frame of mind, at lunch today, I listened with extreme pleasure to the lecture Marie-Laure gave us on the paintings of Alderney. Since last week she has been taking a course in prehistory at the School of the Louvre. That little note on the flight of time and the change of seasons appears to have suddenly thrown her four hundred centuries backwards . . . Our conversation is nothing but neolithic, paleolithic, Magdalenian, Mousterian, Cro-Magnon, well mixed with bisons, gravid artiodactyl mammals and esoteric symbols which anticipate "the best of Klee's elaborations . . ." We are also honored by some synthetic clichés such as: "the Lascaux and Altamira caverns are the Sistine Chapels of prehistory," or better still, "Brassempouy's Venus is the onomatopoeia of Art . . ."

She goes about, fortified with books by Father Breuil and Obermaier which she never puts down, as if she could acquire all that learning by osmosis. She is so pedantic that we shall all become terribly educated. One would never suspect the relationship between unrequited love and culture in the home!

Personally I feel rather sorry for her. Your Didier, from whom of course I have had no sign of life, is a sorry gentleman indeed.

Admire him since you can—I can't.

Your Albertine

P.S. I'm unfair for I do have a consolation: dear Georges showers me with attentions. He wants to help me with the

translating, which is sweet of him, especially since he doesn't know a word of Italian . . . !

Monday the second

Albertine, I sense that my last letter made you a little angry, but don't you see, I'm afraid that between Challengberg's test-tubes and the call of Marie-Laure's cavern, you won't find those victorious dawns and that "rather Russian atmosphere" that you were seeking. As the last straw, Didier, whom I was counting on to perform an act of good sense by getting you out of that hornets' nest, announces his arrival. He is coming, he says, to find once more near me "that subtle intelligence, that live-and-let-live attitude which women in Paris seem to have lost." It seems that you are sinking into a moral *rigor* and slovenliness of thought which is just the opposite of what literary men expect of us.

This cuff showed me that our lion is hurt. Should I let on that I know about your little misunderstanding or would you rather I acted surprised. Answer quickly.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Thursday the 5th

Of course, Cécile, you may tell Didier that you know everything; you may even let him know I am the mistress of his good friend, Dr. Challengberg, and why don't you—since you like a good joke—hint that I adore my new lover? . . . He'll find the necessary phrase to clear his honor. Please remember everything he says, for it's about time the handsome Monsieur Marèze gave me a little enjoyment!

I met him the other evening: I was having dinner with

Georges in an Italian restaurant in the Rue des Canettes, which is Georges's way of studying foreign languages.

I saw Didier too late to warn Georges that we weren't on speaking terms. You know how friendly Georges is, so when Didier walked by looking at some distant horizon, he called out:

"Well, Marèze, still deep in some inner rapture? What have you been doing with yourself, you haven't been around lately?"

"Why, I'm working, my dear chap, so that you editors may wine and dine."

"When will you have something for me?"

"Never. The quality of your paper is too awful."

And he left without appearing to see me, and joined a horrible dark-skinned creature with a short nose. I guess it's just jealousy because Georges thought she was sensational . . . with "a chassis to drive a fifty-year-old marriage on the rocks." The taste of these gentlemen is depressing because she looks like a monkey and she's at least a head taller than Didier. A lovely couple! But then, he must think he's a second Baudelaire. I wonder if he takes his dusky friend on pilgrimages in the Ile Saint-Louis. More likely he locks himself up with her to take hashish or for some other witchery.

I was so nauseated by this meeting—for poor Didier is becoming sordid—that I went to see Challenberg.

He was very natural. He was wearing a white coat with a Russian collar like an American dentist which, I must say, is very becoming on him. He seemed younger, gayer and very happy to see me. Between telephone calls and letters to sign he asked about my health, about Marie-Laure, about Didier . . . Seeming not to listen to my answers, he kept up the conversation. I like his disdain for the useless and intermediary.

If it weren't for his manner of looking at me while seeming to reflect on some problem which doesn't concern me—a look both attentive and absent-minded, which I remembered so well—I might have thought he had forgotten everything.

But at seven o'clock he glanced at his watch, dismissed the head of the laboratory, locked his desk, turned out the light and walked over to me, saying only, "Come," and drew me down on the couch. As I tried to moderate the liveliness of the attack he said in a distinct voice:

"No, listen, stop it, please. I must be at the Learned Society at nine o'clock and I have a report to give. I won't even have time for dinner . . ."

I laughed in his face and struggled harder than ever.

"Ah! You little devil, you tease . . . I'll show you!"

And, my dear, I confess that if I was overcome in an unequal combat, the defeat was all the more sweet for being complete. Wonderingly I lifted my eyes to Challenberg who was watching me with the worn-out and delighted look of a man who has just narrowly escaped a bad accident.

"You have no idea how much I needed to hold you in my arms like this. Right there, hold you tight. You can be pleased with yourself for putting me in such a state . . . but you won't escape me again . . . You're young, healthy, you're exactly what I need. Well, on your feet, get dressed now."

I decided that this man had a talent for making me dress and undress without seeming to.

He turned on the light suddenly and the first thing I saw was the gynecologist's table with its two stirrups. He was already preparing his brief case and filing papers while straightening his clothing.

"Quick now, I'll drop you off. It's on my way—hurry up."

He left me at the corner of the Rue des Saints-Pères and called out:

"Now don't try to get away; come and fetch me tomorrow night at seven. I'll take you out for dinner and you'll spend the night..."

I don't have any pride to tell you about these gallant attentions. The only thing to be said in André's favor is that he doesn't get lost in the labyrinth of dialectic complications, which is a pleasant change from "certain intellectuals..."

Au revoir, darling. Write me a longer letter.

Love,
Albertine

Monday the ninth

Dear Albertine,

Challenberg's beard being less and less blue, I have been trying for two days to do an about-face—since circumstances require it—without losing face.

If I were to tell you, for example, that it's encouraging to know there are still men in this decadent country!—that it must be a pleasant change for you to take the straightest and shortest road instead of wandering about in labyrinths; in other words, to be treated like a cave woman which is what they always promise us but rarely do.

You know how much I admire efficiency: let's consider Challenberg absolved. I can forgive him all the more easily because he leaves your mind free. When you talk about him you are on the very edge of cynicism which is precisely a disdain for the useless and intermediary. That doctor is performing miracles!

Didier appears to be less lucky; perhaps you lose, where he is concerned, that emotional directness? If it's true, I'm overjoyed for I can still hope to see you lead an exemplary life between a cave man and a poet.

For the present, you are unfair: after Marie-Laure, faded and fading, Didier was certainly entitled to some young thing with black magic . . . Besides, I suspect you are exaggerating a lot. Why limit the privilege of eroticism to dark skins? That dinner was perhaps one of those little social obligations which, theoretically, take place once a year but which really arise every week.

But count on me to untangle that heart I know so well and to give you an honest report. He arrives the day after tomorrow. Don't get too involved with Challenberg and tell me how Marie-Laure is getting along with her bisons.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Thursday, December 12

Nothing irritates me more, Cécile, than to think of the verbal acrobatics going on between you and Didier. That little festival spoils everything for me. I have the impression that I am twice frustrated and I hate you, for I can guess that Albertine "is still a child."

In any case, she is a busy child with the Robert-Guichard juniors who want me to go to Mégève with them at Christmas, and Challenberg who begs me to stay in Paris with him . . . The latter is wearing me out. His wife is back so he drags me to all the hotels in the neighborhood to sing praises to my health—to such an extent that I'm beginning to wonder if I'm normal.

"Ah! Do you realize how lucky you are, my poor darling," he said last night, "you're not a neuropath. You can thank your parents for that! . . ."

All this takes place in general between midnight and two o'clock, for the gentleman always has dinners, meetings,

conferences. . . . He insists that I meet him at seven o'clock. He beds me down with sweet magazines and mineral water just like in a train compartment; then he goes off about his business—his happiness being, it seems, to find me asleep. Then it's always the same story: "Ssh, don't move, it's me, André." In two seconds he is at my side and, as if in a dream, I hear the usual: "Yes? Tell me? Darling? Like that? Yes? Do you like that? Oh, yes, I insist! . . ."

When the dear doctor leaves, I hardly wake up, but unfortunately he has the nasty habit of phoning about eight o'clock in the morning to tell me to sleep well, that I'm lucky and that he would like to be able to do the same . . .

When he is not at the hospital he comes in person to tell me not to wake up, and I admit that it's my turn to admire the extraordinary good health of my doctor! I wonder if between three and seven o'clock he honors Mme. Challenberg as much . . .

I'd like to know what she's like, but a sort of pride keeps me from asking questions and he never mentions her. Perhaps I'll ask Marie-Laure who must know her.

Through a desire for compensation or from some unconscious masochism, knowing that Didier is with you, I spend a lot of time with your aunt—and while you talk about us in Bordeaux we talk about you in Paris . . . We had gone to the Louvre to see a few copper masks for we are all through with bisons. In the Carrousel gardens, between the flowerbeds damp with mist we went from archeological considerations to the difficulty of human relations. She has had enough of helping others; it's too devastating for the soul; it's a useless erosion of oneself . . .

"My dear," she said to me, "you'll understand some day that it is impossible to save those who don't want to be saved. I have just learned—and you know whom I'm talking

about—that good will, fervor, purity can do nothing for a dilettante heart . . .”

So much wasted time, self-sacrifice, sterile hopes. But she had felt that the poor boy was so lonely and deprived of an unselfish love, which very young women can't give . . . What's more, dear Cécile had entrusted him to her, so wasn't that just one more reason to take him under her wing? . . . In a word, she did everything for him, she received him into her home, she took him out with her, introduced him to her friends . . .

“I spent long afternoons at the library,” she complained, “whole nights deciphering his manuscripts. Then, too, I sometimes lent him a little money, although it bothered me to do so because, after all, it was Alfred's. . . . It all seems so in vain, and that unfortunate child continues to see in the world only the reflections of things . . . I sometimes wonder, Albertine, if humility doesn't consist in abandoning to their fate those who don't want to be saved? Of course,” she added after a moment's thought, “the poor boy has a very humble background. Naturally he can't be blamed for that but, don't you agree, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear? . . .”

Finding me in a sympathetic mood, she became more and more slanderous. By the time we had reached home, we had decided that little Marèze was a good deal less talented than he imagined, that he was downright affected, ineffective, narcissistic, sadomasochistic and a liar.

We parted, sated, each one to digest her treason in peace.

As for you, I congratulate you. You have a gift for entrusting us to each other.

Write soon.

Albertine

P.S. What do you think I should do for Christmas? Go to Mégève or stay here with my cave man?

Wednesday, December 18

I haven't written to you for several days, dear Albertine, because Didier has arrived and nothing is more absorbing than to give other people a flattering picture of ourselves. We talk about everything except yourself, but you are like a filigree in our conversations . . . actually we talk mostly about Didier Marèze. He's going through a phase of German romanticism and he reads aloud to me from Kleist's play, *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn*, in which he finds new reasons for admiring that golden age when women's demands inflamed men's heroism.

My poor dear, we have lost the sense of grandeur! Our mediocrity emasculates the modern world—not to speak of our egoism, our frigidity, our calculating avidity . . . at last he spoke her name.

My dear aunt, according to Didier, has nothing in common with romantic heroines except the belief that anything having one less rib than she has is there to serve her. I was told that it was useless trying to interest her in "valid" problems because she doesn't possess that third dimension of the mind necessary to get an "authentic" grasp of the world. The skimpiness of her imagination and her intellectual frigidity discourage all efforts.

I remembered your letter and I asked him if it wasn't a case of "useless erosion of oneself"? The phrase delighted him: that's what he was trying to say. He mourned the waste of precious time taken from his writing; I inferred that less literary activities had also been disappointing when he exclaimed:

"How foolish to believe that individuals of average intelligence can be gifted for love! My experience proves that only those possessing a sensuality of the mind from which spring the true pleasures of knowledge also possess that knowledge of pleasure which is the sounding board of

sensuality—to such a point that one could say, borrowing Bossuet's words, that an accomplished being's spirituality should extend to his flesh and his sensuality extend to his soul!"

Eventually, since the merits and charms of my poor aunt were diminishing as the conversation progressed, I asked how a relationship so lacking in enjoyment had ever existed. He admitted then that he had hoped to experience with her pleasures bordering on perversity for, apart from the amusement of seeing how far a society woman can be led in bed, she had at the beginning offered him an "upper class" entertainment.

I also found out, dear Albertine, how Madame Robert-Guichard managed to break off with Lucien "your wife's lover." This lover, officially suspected, was condemned for this reason. However, as Marie-Laure always shifts the responsibility for her cowardice onto others, she wrote to Lucien that an anonymous letter had informed her that he was growing tired of her . . . and so she preferred to see him henceforth on a social basis only in order to keep her dear memories untarnished.

But the pay-off, Didier told me, was Lucien's reply. He didn't deny the charges. He excused himself, tried to explain and minimize the affair, and Marie-Laure realized that she had merely invented the truth. She was furious. Didier had a difficult time preventing her from causing the very scandal she had sought to avoid by her letter—which proves that hurt pride alone can make a woman neglect her own interests.

In any event, my aunt's case is closed. I believe it would have been less painful for all concerned if you hadn't found out. Didier would like me to be the first to speak of that, but I'm not rushing it. I don't look forward to saying that Challenberg is your lover.

Don't let him martyr you, my dear; leave for the mountains if you feel like it. I'm getting ready for a quiet Christmas season and Didier and I bought angel's hair and stars, but his company can't make me forget that for the first time in so many years you are not with me.

Love,
Cécile

Friday the twentieth

Dear Cécile,

Your letter had a curious effect on me: I threw my translation to the four winds, sent a message to Challengberg canceling our rendezvous, and rushed down to your cousins' to hunt for the works of Bossuet where I hoped to find some brick to throw at Didier via you. I was received by Alfred who wasn't too sure whether or not his library contained *A Treatise on Concupiscence*. He made me repeat the title.

"*Treatise on Concupiscence*," he mumbled. "Let's see, let's see now, I should have that some place . . ."

Kneeling in front of the family bookcase we looked for that pious work while carrying on a ribald conversation which strayed from the new generation's weak spinal column to the disintegration of France. Dear Alfred in the role of a pessimistic old grouch was superb.

I was afraid the meeting was going to take a more experimental turn when I came across the treatise and left with a flustered little-girl smile.

I had no sooner closed the library door than I fell into Georges's arms. He made the most of it by playing the clown. "Ah, ah! . . . a virginal modesty colored her soft visage . . . Then Harvey Blueblood, without a word, enfolded the fragile creature and kissed her lips."

So saying, the moron enfolded and kissed me. A rapid but skillful kiss which deserved a warmer welcome.

I went back to my room, part of me hoping that Georges wouldn't fall in love with me—I have so many favors to ask of him!—and another part regretting my awkwardness during such a graceful attack.

I confess I felt dense trying to read Bishop Bossuet's *Concupiscence*. To hell with Didier and his phrasemaking. As a matter of fact, he possesses every single one of the concupiscences: of the flesh, of the eyes, of the heart. He'd do better to keep quiet—I'm beginning to get bored with all this blabbing. I would have given anything to see Challengberg but it was too late.

I tried to console myself by reading Giovanni Papini's latest book on the Devil. I recognized once again your Didier in that "Perfectly conscious complaisance in evil for the sake of evil" which is, it seems, the first symptom of satanism.

Finally I had enough of that verbal rubbish and I went to the movies.

Thanks for your Christmas thoughts. . . . I am thinking of you—of you only—with great affection.

Your Albertine

P.S. All the same, I did enjoy the story about Lucien . . . !

Monday

Dear Albertine,

We have at last talked about you.

Didier, in all simplicity, diagnosed "thwarted love." Then he sank into a metaphysical silence. "Challengberg! Challengberg!" he repeated as if there were no possible explanation for anything so incredible. The fate of young women devoted to imponderables, to misunderstandings,

submitted to the rhythm of events of which they understand neither the cause nor the end, suddenly seemed tragic to him. He accepted his responsibility with such severity that I suspect he will not shrink from penance . . . Albertine, if you grow up a little, he's in your clutches! He has always detested Challenberg.

However that may be, he couldn't get off the subject of that misdeal. He told me about the bedroom episode.

Indeed, I'm sure I don't know if complaisance in evil is a symptom of satanism, but when Satan has that voice, those hands and that nonchalance, how can you not admire the alchemy which transforms disgust into pleasure?

Marie-Laure bored him, but when he learned that she would henceforth receive him in your room, and the first moment of revolt passed, he had a vision of the possibilities the situation offered to his love of risk and what food for his imagination. He couldn't resist it. It is a rare pleasure, it seems, to possess a woman one scorns on the bed of the woman one loves . . . and what better erotic stimulant than the realization of the desire to humiliate, latent in any virile act?

I gather that Marie-Laure's humiliations were varied and spectacular. "I couldn't have broken off with her at a better time," he admitted, "for I had surpassed myself and dared everything . . ."

Seeing my surprise, he assured me that tepidness alone is bad for love, and he gave me to understand that men who exclude intermediary emotions from their lives have the privilege of great amorous strength. "The carnal are the rich, are the kings!" Didier was declaiming when Philippe came in, as bewildered as a canary whose cage is uncovered at midnight. Brought up to date on our conversation, he claimed we were complicating simple things and he went off to bed shrugging his shoulders.

We continued our conversation in a low voice with that secret and almost sensual joy which springs up between two people from their complicity against a third.

At two o'clock we were obliged to conclude that it was lucky we weren't together more often, for we philosophize so much on life we wouldn't have time to live . . . We got back to serious matters and Didier read me the beginning of his next lecture, "Eroticism in Heroic Literature."

Really, he has a one-track mind.

I went to bed, worn out by sexuality, equivalences and transferences. Philippe was asleep and the silence was good.

Good night, darling. Merry, merry Christmas.

Tell me quickly where I should write to you.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Friday, December 27

Dear Cécile, I spent a watery Christmas in the rain, cold and solitude. I shed tears rereading *Anna Karenina*, lent to me by my hostess, a sailor's widow. And that's all.

Other young women could tell you how they celebrated Christmas Eve and what dress they wore. I can only tell you that the law which obliges the master to walk beside his mules on the towpath is a cruel law, for human presence speeds up the animals' pace and gives them heart trouble . . . A horrible detail softened by the fact that almost all barges are motorized. "But that," says our sailor's wife, "is not good for the belly!"

Don't think I've gone crazy: it's simply the conclusion to a story about a telephone.

I had begun to enjoy a nice rest, far from all those gentlemen, when I was awakened at dawn by two fellows, one bringing a small valise and the other the news that he was going to put in a telephone.

"But I didn't ask for a telephone."

"Is that so, lady? Just look at this 'ere paper—unless we've come to the wrong door."

No mistake, I had ordered a telephone. I had even signed the order.

"You sure must know the right people! Get a telephone in two days and right on top of Christmas into the bargain. Well we ain't seen that every day. I never seen it 'appen before..."

I realized that this was Challenberg's doing.

As soon as the characters had left I telephoned the third floor to give everyone a surprise. Marie-Laure answered and said, as if there were nothing unusual about the call:

"I'm very glad you've phoned, dear Albertine, because I was just going to send Lucette up to ask you for that little book my husband so unwisely lent you. He hadn't remembered the theme of the book and he's terribly embarrassed about his mistake..."

"About what mistake, dear Marie-Laure?"

"Oh come now . . . You're still awfully young, Albertine, and you don't foresee the consequences of your acts. We'll talk about it when I get back from Mègeve."

I hung up and, a little bothered, opened Bossuet's *Treatise* at random. I read, "Put down that rebellious flesh whose imperious law which is in our members has caused so many tears to be shed, so many moans to be uttered by all the saints..." etc., etc.

I was still laughing when a brand new bell made me run to the telephone: Challenberg!

"Naturally the line was already engaged . . . ! Really, darling, you don't put much value on the time of people who work..."

That was his first sentence. Afterward I learned the reason for all the gags: Challenberg was so angry when he

received my message canceling our date that, unable to contact me, he decided to keep in touch with me by a modern method. He had phoned your cousins asking them to fetch me to the phone. I was at the movies so it was Alfred who suffered Challenberg's wrath.

"You see," he said, "Alfred told me that you were 'all wrapped up in concupiscence' and as I don't like to have people make a fool of me I told him off . . . But you, you've got a lot of nerve—that book of yours is making everyone laugh and it makes me sick. If, in spite of the way I take care of you, you still need dirty books I might as well give up trying to understand women!"

This time my indignation was stronger than my sense of humor and I hung up. *Adesso basta.*

Bossuet be hanged!

But dear André, as you have undoubtedly noticed, is a man of action. I had just finished dressing when he came bursting in: "Listen, darling, we can't go on like this. You see, I can't allow myself all this running to and fro. You don't realize what kind of life I lead. I'm dead tired and I have no one to help me." He aroused my pity by telling me about his married life and pleaded with me to go away with him for Christmas, far from everything and everyone. "My darling, listen to me, you're too nervous, you need to get a grip on yourself. Look at the state you're in. You can't get along without me, and you know it. I'll come and pick you up at three o'clock. When you're alone you only do silly things. I'm certainly going to look pretty stupid to the Robert-Guichards . . . and you're going to get a bad name for yourself if you're not careful!"

He then proved to me how worried he was about my reputation and my health; I experienced that rare pleasure of being possessed by a man I don't love on the same bed where the man I love flouted me . . .

At three o'clock we sallied forth in driving rain. It was dark when we reached the Loing River and a little, down-at-the-heels inn, all windows, which is undoubtedly lovely in July. It was so cold we were obliged to eat in the kitchen with the owners. But André was full of life; he even had the good taste to laugh at his own blunder. "Poor old Robert Guichard, to think I accused him of pornography, and the funniest part of it is he didn't know how to defend himself . . . !"

The next day, the day before Christmas, after several telephone calls to Paris, André left after explaining to me that he had promised to spend Christmas Eve at his in-laws' and that he would stop off there to cancel it (!), that he would be back right after dinner . . . "And so we can have Christmas Eve supper together, sweetheart. You understand that I can't permit myself to treat them impolitely, especially during my wife's absence." This was how I learned that Mrs. Challenberg was the daughter of Professor Rougier, the famous endocrinologist. Thus, for the future of the Challenberg laboratory, I dined alone with the sailors.

I went to bed early with a hot-water bottle and *Anna Karenina*. I chased away a lot of memories and tried to find some humor in my situation . . . I went to sleep late without waiting for André any longer.

I was awakened at seven o'clock in the morning by the hostess calling me to the phone. I threw on some clothes and ran down to the icy-cold dance hall to hear the doctor explain that his father-in-law had asked him to take an urgent case, that he hadn't closed his eyes all night, that he would arrive right after lunch or, at the latest, for dinner. Before hanging up he had the nerve to wish me a Merry Christmas.

I swallowed a cup of tea and went back to bed. I was still asleep when the sailor's widow called me again. I went down to freeze once more: it was that monster again phoning to

tell me how much he loved me. You should have heard me yelling, in a wild voice, "Yes, that's right, when you can . . . me too of course I do!"

This session took place every two hours. The patient was, it appeared, all set to drop dead. André felt that he was taking his time about it. "It's funny, I don't know what's wrong, he's hanging on; it's not normal, I just don't understand!"

At last things took a turn for the better; that is, the patient died and the doctor arrived during the evening, apologizing for not bringing me a gift: "All the shops were closed, my poor darling, and anyway I had other things to think about. But don't worry, you can have anything you want tomorrow."

Tomorrow! Good Lord . . . and they claim to understand women!

We spent a horrible night: I had hysterics every time he touched me and he was in an indescribable state of exasperation: "You're all the same, all you women are crazy . . . Ah, you kept your hand well hidden . . . but at the least little thing that doesn't go as you want, it's always the same old story. Listen, you're only a poor little cortico-visceral mechanism, nothing more . . ." I was terribly insulted and called him a low-down cad. Well, my dear, he gave me the same look Richard did at the Concorde station: complete stupefaction in the face of injustice. "In that case," he snapped, "it does a lot of good to turn one's life topsy-turvy for a woman the way I have for you . . ."

I learned at the same time that I held human life cheap, as if I had killed the poor fellow who had just died.

Feminine irresponsibility, in other words!

We went to sleep, full of resentment. I had planned to run away at dawn but when day came I sacrificed my dignity to my health.

We made up about midday.

I returned to Paris with him; we were both sad and tired. He dropped me off at home and said, "Don't be too hard on me—I know only too well that I won't be able to keep you with me much longer. Do you think it's a pleasant thought to live with?"

For the first time I found I had a particular compassion for the brute and he touched me with his curious mixture of niceness and roughness. This thought depressed me. On arriving at my door I had decided to live alone from then on. I found my room full of flowers: an azalea from poor Richard, water lilies from Georges with these words: "fluctuat nec mergitur," and a bunch of red roses which I recognized at once; they were in the only vase without a card in front of it—my good daily woman had arranged everything very nicely. Nevertheless, I telephoned the florist; they had been sent by wire—from Bordeaux, of course.

My poor Cécile, how I cried over all my bouquets! It was only a slight consolation to realize that only my lover had forgotten me.

How did Jacques get my address? Cécile, you must tell me why you did that? These flowers have upset me . . .

Au revoir, my Cécile, thank you for the beautiful books, I'm going to read them by the fireside. I'm frozen.

Love,

Your poor Albertine

Thursday, January 2

Dear Albertine,

Yes, I did give your address to Jacques and I'm going to tell you how it came about, hoping like naïve people that an explanation is an excuse.

I hadn't seen Jacques for a long time when he telephoned a few days before Christmas to announce his visit. I found him thinner but still as handsome, his pallor accentuating that Spanish look. If I was expecting a passage of arms before getting to the real subject—that is, you (and why not admit that I had prepared some lovely phrases to help him out)—I was disappointed. He had scarcely sat down when, without asking about my health, my husband or any of the usual polite formulas, he attacked me in that direct manner of his, declaring that he had come to ask for your address. "I don't believe that Albertine will be coming back just yet," he said, "for she must be looking forward to her first Christmas in Paris—which is very natural." I told him you were probably spending Christmas with my cousins. He explained that he wanted your address not in order to write to you but to send flowers, and he added with a smile, "Isn't it natural for a husband to want to send flowers to his wife for Christmas? And if I didn't do so, Albertine would think I was hurt by these few months of solitude she needs so much—that isn't the case, I can assure you, although I do miss her terribly."

Then he talked to me, not about you, but about your life together when he'll have his business a little better in hand. He unfolded his plans with confidence and in a concrete manner, in terms of years, trips, income. He kept saying "we" . . . In short, he was building the future.

Didier and I had just had one of those subtle conversations where each idea masks another more delicious one—like one of those fowls served at formal dinners which turn out to be foie gras—and I was sated and almost nauseated by those verbal orgies. Jacques' words which were full of the reality of life pleased me. It seemed very natural to give him your address to send you flowers. When he left I

decided it was difficult to struggle with a man who has time on his side.

There you are, Albertine, forgive me for what was a sincere impulse. I'm positive Jacques won't write to you.

Now I must go with Didier who leaves for Madrid tonight.

Love and kisses, darling,

Cécile

Sunday night

My Cécile, I'm starting the New Year with a cold I must have caught by the Loing. In a hurry to cure me, André has stuffed me with antibiotics: my fever has gone but I'm worn out. I was so weak when I read your letter that I couldn't resist my impulse and did a silly thing: I sent a note to Jacques to thank him for his roses and silence and to tell him that the "crisis" wasn't over, that I was still seeking on this earth some revelation of myself. I begged him to respect my retreat and promised that I'd write to him later. Very firm but affectionate. It's indecent, isn't it? Well, what's done is done.

Only your cousins' return pulled me out of my depression. Your dear aunt had a big surprise in store for us.

Hearing that I was ill, she came to see me as soon as she arrived. "Albertine," she apologized, "you must excuse my outburst the day I left when I demanded the return of that little book." Brushing aside my protests she continued: "Yes, yes . . . I was deluded by my ignorance, like all the others, and I must confess I judged you too severely. Let me explain . . ."

Urged by wicked curiosity, Marie-Laure hadn't put the abominable *Treatise on Concupiscence* back in Alfred's library; she had slipped it into her suitcase . . . "Isn't there

in each of us an invincible propensity for filth? . . . I am still embarrassed by how much I looked forward to the pleasure of reading trash. I found a thousand good reasons for rationalizing it; in reality I was only hiding my weaknesses . . . But from error truth is born and it was my sin which redeemed me! That admirable work opened my eyes and I realized that until then my life had been only folly and human error . . . Because of your youth I'll spare you the inventory of my sins."

She stood up to take my hands, sat down at the foot of my bed, for I wasn't back on my feet yet, and her tears fell on the bed, witness to her former iniquities.

Eventually she stood up and, glaring at poor Richard's azalea which was sturdily surviving the flight of days, she murmured as if to herself: "The body is the heaviest yoke the soul has to bear . . ." Then, coming over to me: "Let me talk to you as a friend . . ."

I tried to dam up the flow of words which were becoming more and more personal, but in vain. Wasn't it her duty to bring to others the joy and comfort she had just discovered? When she added that she would humiliate herself as much as necessary to share with me the benefits of her providential error, I knew I was in for it.

"Not that I can allow myself to judge others, and certainly André Challenberg has every possible excuse for leading the life he does. His wife, as you know, treats him like dirt under her feet. But a child like you, Albertine, must not be the victim of that unfortunate situation . . ."

I tried to say that . . . No, no, no, she knew all about it, she was a woman and my sister in the bondage of the flesh. Luckier than I, she was extending a helping hand.

There was nothing left for me but to take that hand and confess my unhappiness. Thus, I found out, by pretending to know all about it—and I wasn't fooling anyone—that

dear André's wife was a remarkable woman, still very appealing in spite of being forty, famous for her business sense which she used in profitable dealings in works of art, at the same time scorning this type of success, for she has a personal fortune which permits her to satisfy her deepest desire—that of dominating others.

Nothing was spared me: the writers and artists she launches for the fun of it, her paintings worthy of great collections, the avant-garde poets she has published, the interior decorating firms she creates, her travels all over the world, and the young girls who are more or less her secretaries and whom she tyrannizes in public . . .

"How do you suppose," I asked, "Challenberg, with his despotic character, ever accepted that?"

"Oh, come now, she is Professor Rougier's daughter and what's more she owns three-quarters of the laboratory's stock. Both are vying to get control but Hélène's money is a serious handicap."

Finally I learned that some physical incompatibility—ironic fate—had long since separated them. Marie-Laure hints that all the wrongs are on Hélène's side—she is said to have only a moderate liking for the stronger sex . . .

Poor dear André, why did such a thing have to happen to him of all people.

I could now understand the reasons for my astounding healthiness, and he lost in my eyes the prestige of a brute which I had generously attributed to him.

All this information annoyed me and Marie-Laure knew it. She took advantage of it to advise me to break it off and to make me admit that my dear doctor was "physical, disgustingly physical"—"but don't despair, Albertine, for if the flesh lusts against the spirit, the spirit will deliver us from the flesh."

She promised to lend me the Epistles to the Corinthians and I thanked her from the bottom of my heart.

Now isn't that good news, dear Cécile?

As for the remarkable Madam Challenberg, I'd certainly like to know why you never said a word about her.

Happy New Year anyway to you and "those near and dear to you."

Albertine

Wednesday, January 8

My dear,

It's natural for sensitive women deprived of lovers to indulge their soul in a few thrills . . . Praise be thus to Bossuet's sonorous phrases which made the transference easier and hurried Marie-Laure into the arms of the Lord! You have received with one hand and given with the other, dear Albertine! Marie-Laure will surely remain in a state of grace long enough to denounce the sins of those around her. My only regret is that her zeal should have ruined the pleasure I had expected to derive from your first meeting with Hélène Challenberg.

I hadn't told you about her because I was hoping that you would meet her at Marie-Laure's and that the shock would be sufficient to make you break away from André. She has everything that impresses and attracts young women of our generation: the prestige of elegant maturity and the fascination of a mind broadened by experience. Then too, all those rumors—we really don't know if they're well founded or not.

In the days before her passion for travel, she ruled over a salon where she gathered around her a few young protégés, among them Didier . . . It was whispered that she had set her heart on perfecting this young provincial. Marie-

Laure, ostensibly to save the reputation of her friend, Hélène, went to Challengberg and complained about peoples' nasty tongues. Your Challengberg, who had never dreamed that a young man without a job could be a rival, was thunderstruck and then exclaimed: "My dear woman, I haven't time to waste on gossip. If Hélène amuses herself with would-be authors, that's her business. Me, I go to a brothel, it saves time and it's much better done."

Yet the next time he saw Didier with his wife he said rude things about untalented writers and bluffers. Hélène loves to trick her husband into such performances. But as she isn't a woman to sacrifice her own wishes to the fun of bothering someone, she left soon after for Italy and Marie-Laure inherited Didier.

When he returns from Spain I'm going to suggest a new lecture subject to him: "Eroticism in Religious Literature." If his attentions have led Marie-Laure to religion, it's the achievement of his career as a Don Juan.

Affectionately; take care of your cold.

Cécile

Monday the thirteenth

Dear Cécile,

You win. Hélène Challengberg haunts my dreams. The other night I was in Buenos Aires with her, in a bedroom where a series of fans were turning, and she ordered me to type: "Faster, faster," she yelled. I couldn't. "All right then," she said, "get undressed." I woke up with a start.

I don't believe I shall ever forgive André for that dream. I haven't seen him for two days.

Florence had just returned from Mégève. I don't remember whether I told you that she had slipped away from her stepmother to run off with Roger Lecat to a small inn above the Arbois Pass. But the poor thing seems disappointed in

her escapade. "You know what Roger is like," she explained, "he was with a group from the fourteenth district; he organized the dormitories, the camp kitchen, the walks . . ." He was so enthusiastic he even slept in the dormitory with his boys, entrusting the girls to his sweetheart. "Ah! if you knew how fed up I am with harmonicas," she admitted. I was somewhat consoled to see that our lovers celebrated Christmas in the same way.

Marie-Laure is the best consolation for both of us. Humble by divine command, she surpasses herself in this new role where her exhibitionism displays all sorts of variations. She lies in wait to corner each of us in a tête-à-tête and confess her sins—she is refreshed, rosy-checked and relaxed. She is now getting her devotion organized. She has begun an inventory of all pious objects of any value in the house and she has already recovered from her aging mother-in-law the prayer stool belonging to Alfred's first wife, which by a ricochet has rekindled her fervor for Alfred. But conjugal fervor being, as we all know, dietetic, it is his liver she attacks. Your poor uncle finds even his simplest pleasures limited by Saint Augustine himself—"greed never knows where necessity ends." There is nothing to eat at your aunt's these days—she buys icons. At first Georges was delighted with the new pastime, but now it's beginning to pall. He came to the table yesterday wearing sunglasses and when his stepmother asked why, he replied, "Because of the halo."

That's the state of things at present. You might suggest to Didier that his mission in this family is not yet ended.

Yours,

Albertine

P.S. Florence was unable to stand that comedy any longer and left for the South to recuperate after her stay in the mountains. I miss her.

Dear Albertine,

Didier returned yesterday quite excited by Spanish debaucheries which he describes to me down to the last detail on the pretext that they are indescribable. After the narration of the phases through which a philosopher's soul passes while watching a naked woman dancing on a table, I announced the good news.

"At thirty-five," he said to me, "Marie-Laure is getting ahead of herself! And let me tell you that she can play the part of Mary Magdalene at little cost: as far as I was able to lead her the road was short, for she isn't talented."

I felt that he was already mentally applying the Spanish treatment to her. I encouraged him . . . at the same time helping him to discover that it might perhaps be more amusing to see how far she would go on her saintly road. We were discussing the pros and cons of each solution when there arrived—as in an Italian comedy—what we were least expecting: a letter from Marie-Laure to Didier which settled the question. Here is a copy of her letter:

My very dear friend,

I didn't reply to your melancholy letter about autumn because it expressed so well what I felt—and which I would have said so badly—that any reply would have been vain and impertinent. What you said about the law of the seasons is one of those eternal truths which must be received in silence and, perhaps, dear Didier, your little letter was the beginning of a transformation in me which a lucky accident completed. But I'll tell you about that another day because it will interest you a lot.

Since your departure I have undergone profound inner changes. But, alas, it isn't enough to change oneself to change others, and I have once again had an example of the world's unkindness. I hesitated to speak to you about

it but since it concerns you too it seemed only right to warn you.

Natalie, Georges's ex-wife, with whom, as you know, I have remained on good terms, told me about an absurd bet supposedly made by H  l  ne Challenberg who is just back from Italy. H  l  ne speaks lightly of our affection and says she is confident that she could take you away from me if she cared to. She even bet some friends 100,000 francs that you will be by her side once more in less than three weeks.

She doesn't know, of course, about the development of our friendship and in my new frame of mind I will do nothing to keep you from going back to H  l  ne, whom I like and whose rich personality I admire—yet certain scruples trouble me. The bet at first made me smile—rather sadly, for it is a part of those games, the variety of which vanity is now apparent to me—but on reflection it seemed to me to display an arrogance and lack of charity which aroused my friendly solicitude. For H  l  ne's own good she should for once in her life meet with defeat. Losing those 100,000 francs, by leading her to serious reflection on her conduct, would force her to realize how immoral it is to gamble in matters of the heart. As you are in a better position than anyone to measure H  l  ne's pride, I'm sure you'll agree to give her this warning. As far as I am concerned, I would willingly sacrifice my reputation for two more months to prevent her sinister scheme from succeeding. So, are you willing that in the eyes of the world we should continue to display—until the deadline set by H  l  ne has expired—an intimacy which only we shall know is untarnished? It would be satisfying for once to see purity triumph over the machinations of those who stake their souls on chance.

Telephone as soon as you return to let me know what you plan to do.

Very sincerely,
Marie-Laure

That changes our plans, doesn't it? Didier, vexed at being the object of a bet, has decided to teach H  l  ne Challengberg a lesson. On the other hand, he liked the idea of renewing his friendship with Marie-Laure as long as he thought there was an obstacle; but now the easiness of the task has dampened his enthusiasm. In short, our philosopher in his indecision has only one definite wish: to make those two ladies pay as dearly as possible for thinking they can use a man to satisfy their pride. Why, dear Albertine, shouldn't you be the third villain of the piece? You could send Andr   back to H  l  ne and steal the lover from both of the women. It would be fun to show those two specialists in double-crossing that they can be beaten at their own game and that they were mistaken in thinking the na  ve are innocuous. I am sending back to you a Didier who is all set to take the bait; it's up to you to strike.

Affectionately,
C  cile

Sunday night

Dear C  cile,

That's all very well and good—our little group is going to become a big family! I agree to your plan because those women would pervert a choirboy. I repeated to myself the Tartuffian hypocrisies of Marie-Laure during our lunch today with a Dominican priest, Marie-Laure's newly appointed confessor—yet he seems to be a serious-minded

chap. And I thought that such reflections would surely dissolve the last shreds of my innocence. The priest is the latest invention of our dear convert; he is dignified, thin, solemn. He observes his penitent without sympathy; Alfred and Georges seem to interest him more, women obviously being small fry to the Church. Marie-Laure, who seems unable to grasp this difference, eats him up. She devours him with her eyes and improves the menu with a few delicacies; thus, Alfred is quite happy to have the Dominican at his table. Georges is already trying to get the Church's permission to publish a very leftist Catholic book which he hopes will arouse a lot of discussion.

But all this doesn't tell us how to defeat our wicked friends, for haven't Didier and I officially parted company? To be frank, Cécile, the feelings I had for him are so far behind me now that this game would not bother me. On the contrary, I wouldn't mind if the lesson given to the ladies served also for M. Marèze . . . but how can I get into the game if he doesn't come to me?

For the present, I am working. I went back to the translating without enthusiasm. André wears me out with constant scenes, claiming that I am not at his entire disposition.

These married men are amazing!

Good-by, angel, write soon.

Albertine

P.S. I was forgetting Marie-Laure's latest: she was telling us she had felt obliged to give up her classes—fascinating as they were—at the Louvre and when we asked her the reason she replied:

"Are there not also fornications of the eyes?"

"My dear Madame Robert-Guichard," groaned the priest, raising his hand as if to ward off some horrible vision, "Saint Augustine, I believe, was not thinking of works of art when he said that!"

Thursday, January 23

Dear Albertine,

The zeal of our penitent must be contagious since you now want to teach everyone a lesson. But aren't you a little new at the game to plot simultaneously with and against Didier? To begin with, stick to the ladies . . . the rest may be added unto you.

I told Didier about my plan. At first the idea of you as an accomplice seemed absurd to him.

"Albertine?" he snorted, "she wouldn't and couldn't. Games like this need flexibility, a lot of immorality and the ability to enjoy the useless. Anyway, you're forgetting that she hates me."

I told him that he was mistaken and that your stormy affair with Challenberg had long since made you forget that little infatuation (which vexed him); I hinted that your naïve manner hid an experienced young woman (which surprised him); that poor Challenberg was submissive, subdued by your caprices and very unhappy (which delighted him), and I insinuated finally that, having got from this lover all the amusement you could expect to get, you wouldn't be displeased to have some new distraction.

"Go and see Albertine," I told him. "I'll send some books to her by you and this will give you a pretext. Tell her as naturally as possible about your plans to make immorality attractive. Be gay, talk about the unforeseen pleasures the game will bring you. If she hesitates, do your act about the shortness of life and declare that to deprive yourselves of the spectacle of Marie-Laure and Hélène seeing you together at one of the season's galas would be an insult to the fate which offered you this chance. I know Albertine. She won't be able to resist the temptation of seeing the ladies' annoyance, and you'll still be outlining the plan when she'll suggest holding the party that very night . . ."

So I convinced him and he'll get in touch with you. The inspiration of the moment will do the rest.

Have fun, dear Albertine. To amuse oneself is the most important occupation in the world—miraculous and fragile, it is born of chance and dies from habit.

Here everything goes on as usual.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Tuesday the twenty-eighth

My compliments, dear Cécile. He started out with the shortness of life: "Let us not be like the animals Pliny the Elder described who eat their feet, and let us not devour our substance waiting for things that never come, let us take our destiny in hand or our destiny will devour us."

This took place at the Deux Magots café, for our poet, thinking it would be disagreeable for me to see him on the scene of the crime, summoned me by special delivery letter to give me your books, slipping in a lovely phrase about tactfulness forcing him to the rudeness of putting me to such trouble...

I was happy but disenchanted to see him again, for though I still find him charming, that old feeling is gone. Watching him is like watching a play—I admire and applaud.

He is a little ill at ease and redoubles his efforts to please (!). I must be honest: he is talented and very quickly we began to laugh at the "good joke" we were going to play on those two women, just as though everything that happened between us a few months ago was only in preparation for this comedy. I find this second act very funny and a little sad. It is agreed that Didier will go back to Marie-Laure to play the role of lover while at the same time renew-

ing his courtship of Hélène, and in three weeks—at the precise moment when each is waiting for the denouement—we'll make a big show of our passionate affair.

Poor André! I felt I should warn Didier about this detail but it only seems to increase his delight. I suspect that Monsieur Marèze, who isn't a neophyte (like some of us) at this dissolute game, is getting ready for every degree of pleasure.

As for me, I don't know how I'm going to get out of this hornets' nest, lacking in that quality so indispensable today: immorality!

Dear Cécile, I'm counting on you. Didier must have promised you the description of his exploits. I await impatiently the description of the description.

You say things are as usual—with your gift for throwing families into confusion, I don't understand how you manage to remain part of one.

Love,
Albertine

Monday, February 3

Dear little Albertine,

You played your role well. Didier admits in his letter that he had misunderstood you.

"Truthfulness obliges me to say," he wrote, "that I had misjudged Albertine. I find she possesses a sort of cynical voracity which speaks well for the future."

With the seducer reassured, it is now only a question of winning the match, and he is working energetically:

No sooner had I left our young friend than I hurried to the Robert-Guichards'. Marie-Laure welcomed me, her hair parted in the middle and modestly pulled back to show her renunciation of the world while heightening

her beauty. The human heart is thus: at the moment I am to betray her, this woman seems once more desirable. My behavior showed a confusion which was not due solely to my preoccupation at deceiving her, and it suited my words perfectly. I took her hands; she pulled away as if regretfully. "Dear Didier, promise to help me avoid a repetition of past mistakes. The temptation will be great but let us not forget that our only aim is to show H  l  ne the error of her ways!"

I promised (unwillingly, so she wouldn't believe me) and, for H  l  ne's good, we tore her to shreds as can only be done by the joint tenderness of a friend and a former lover.

This conversation cloaked H  l  ne in a new seduction.

I left Marie-Laure to that warm languor which comes from the enjoyment of being nasty, and fled to Boulevard Raspail. I found H  l  ne discussing the spring collection with the young couturier, Herbin. She sent him away to receive me, settled me on her divan, served tea; in short, she took possession of me again with that tenderness and firmness which a few months earlier had blended the pleasures of love with juvenile interludes. I let myself go a little . . . she invited me to dinner. I refused, feigning embarrassment and hinting that it was caused by fear of vexing Marie-Laure. I showed in my refusal an exasperation which signified if you knew how weary I am of it all, but kindness obliges me . . . H  l  ne accepted the challenge with tact and gusto. It was evident to her that the match was won. While giving me permission to come back and see her she said, "Come now, you're only a child! What difference can it make if we go out together? Aren't we in a class by ourselves? We have a right to take or to leave. Don't forget that you are the most gifted young writer of your generation."

I was not forgetting anything. I kissed a lovely, nervous hand and I left, delighted by her self-confidence.

Since these two women desire me, I won't be cruel much longer. Besides, since I am to punish them together shouldn't I also reward them together? I'll give them everything except what they want: public knowledge of their happiness, and for the only time in their life when they don't want it, they'll have a discreet lover . . .

I leave you to meditate on these niceties, dear Albertine. But tell me how my aunt can reconcile Didier's return with her religion.

Affectionately,
Cécile

Wednesday the fifth

Dear Cécile,

Our Didier gives me an entirely different song and dance: "My dear, those women bore me to death; we've cut off our nose to spite our face! I saw in this intrigue only a means of seeing you again, of obtaining your pardon . . . as it turns out, to play the game well, I no longer have the time to see you, you, the only one I really needed . . . To console myself, I may write a treatise on Intention. It will be bitter! . . ."

The work must be under way, for our philosopher looks worn-out. As for me, I reassured him by saying that in view of the rainy days ahead, as well as to facilitate his courtship of Hélène, I would devote myself entirely to André. He then thought it necessary to explain my heart to me: "On the eve of making your lover suffer, my dear, you are going to feel increased affection; it's a very common reaction and entirely unworthy of your intelligence. Instead, seek—in

this inevitable breaking off which you subconsciously desire—to find in the idea of ‘never more’ a renewal of pleasure in order to have no regrets in leaving a man whose resources you have exhausted.”

Hearing him talk like this, I wondered if it was the same Didier who a few months ago held me tight in his arms with an emotion which didn’t seem affected. The wheel of hearts turns quickly in Paris.

I didn’t disclose these reflections which he would have considered childish but I said, “But, my dear, I’m not sure I want to break it off with André. Men of his age have a power over us which you can’t understand.”

He looked at me mockingly, shook his head and, taking my hands to pat them protectively, said, “Here now, listen, you’re a nice girl.” His imitation of Challenberg was so perfect that I was obliged to laugh, which didn’t prevent my noting that our methods of coquetry, both his and mine, were really pathetic. You see, I’m learning.

André is teaching me the rest with his technical approach which will always astound me. But what’s more, I had the pleasure to learn that I sleep in a left lateral *decumbitus* and that I have on the shoulder of the same side a little wart which can be removed if I so desire . . . In fact, I am no longer unacquainted with any of the mechanics of those sweet—so-called amorous—emotions: a kiss on the neck should descend to the small of the back and then upward to the brain. If the kiss doesn’t go down or up—which can always happen in the case of a strong-minded person—psychiatric treatment should be considered. This inconvenience which can be avoided by choosing a doctor as a lover, for he will take into consideration the woman’s sensorial itinerary, called reflex arc, which may be centrifugal or centripetal and which, in turn, divides Eve’s daughters into two groups: the cortico-visceral and the viscero-cortical!

Take your choice, my dear . . . The first group, it appears, requires a long conversation before being embraced; the second, on the contrary, listens more willingly to its partner afterwards. Eve or Lilith in other words . . .

Although André once accused me of being a poor little cortico-visceral mechanism, I think he really places me in the other simpler category of the children of Lilith, if I am to judge by the direct method he has always used in putting me to bed. But how can I be sure . . . ? Although our doctor multiplies his demonstrations and examples, I am so anxious to find out whether I am viscerocortical or cortico-visceral that I watch over the circuits very carefully and no longer have any sensations at all while in the arms of my astounding lover! I wonder if the good ladies enjoy themselves as much with Didier.

Your dear aunt, whose expression belies her words, assures me that she is tortured by the return of that "poor child." On the pretext of asking my advice she came once again to tell me the truth. She claimed that every day since his departure Didier had sent her admirable letters in which his passion vied with his regrets. "My heart was torn," she told me, "between the very natural desire to keep my painfully won serenity and that other equally natural desire to help a creature whom I had particularly cherished. My Christian duty urged both solutions with equal force. Understanding at last that I could not avoid this ordeal, I decided to choose the more difficult task—the straight way, Albertine!—and I wrote to Didier to say that I forgave him."

It was at this point, dear Cécile, that our good Samaritan's trials began, because poor Didier refuses to believe that she can no longer give him a heart which is not hers to give. And so he exaggerates the eccentricities most likely to alarm her spiritual vigilance and he even goes so far as

to describe horrible debaucheries from which he begs her to save him.

You can easily foresee the new dilemma which rends this Christian heart:

"Shouldn't one, Albertine, in certain cases sacrifice one's body to save a soul? . . ."

How could I not encourage her? So I was the first to point out that an overstrict virtue hides a lack of humility. She thought me cruel and left, saying she was going to pray for the strength to follow advice the severity of which was greater than I had realized.

I think, dear Cécile, you took fright too quickly for religion which won't suffer in the least. Your aunt, who certainly knows how to cope with her trial, will be both evangelic and biblical, tooth for tooth with Hélène, body for soul with Didier.

There's nothing like telling your friends the truth, is there?

Tell me Didier's soon.

Your Albertine

Monday, February 10

Dear Albertine,

The ways of cutting off our nose to spite our face are varied, as you will see.

"Eight days," Didier wrote me, "of counter-point played 'forte' with one hand and 'piano' with the other between a reticent Marie-Laure and a determined Hélène have at last led to the final chord: the two adversaries fell the same day."

But, my dear, how our intentions delude us! I began this intrigue for the sole pleasure of telling you about it and—why not admit it?—in the hope of seducing you by

offering these pleasures of the intelligence which are, alas, the only ones you allow me . . . but the methods employed to succeed scarcely leave me the time to write to you. I leave Marie-Laure, vanquished in spite of herself, to offer to Hélène a lover recaptured in spite of himself, and my time is spent administering proofs of my cruelty and my weakness.

Now executioner, now victim, I might have told you that only the diversity of the preambles gave these games some semblance of pleasure—if it weren't for the surprise of discovering a characteristic common to both women which nothing in the past could have led me to foresee: a firm determination to make me happy.

You can't imagine, my dear, just how far amorous unselfishness can go when women give themselves to love not for their pleasure but for their triumph. They can't do enough for me. They lie in wait for me . . . I am foreseen and forestalled . . . their solicitude gives no respite and their steadfast pursuit of my happiness is such that, less gifted and less in control of myself, I could have doubts about reaching the end of this bet before my strength fails . . . Ah, dear one, poets jest less than we think, for as far as I am concerned beds are tombs!

You can see, Albertine, that our lion, encouraged by Marie-Laure in ways of humility, does not hesitate to sacrifice his health to the cause—the body being, it appears, only a stage in the journey.

Well, that sacrifice will have been useful to everyone since Didier dedicates it to each of us in turn. *Ma chère*, is there a man in this world intelligent enough to realize that his wiles cannot withstand the complicity of two women?

Affectionately,
Cécile

Dear Cécile,

So I attributed his bedroom pallor to the "Treatise on Intention"—I'm vexed that my naïveté is so hard to kill off. I try to find consolation by telling myself that Didier is the victim not only of different intentions, his own and the ladies', but also of the first signs of spring which have already budded the tree by the statue of Henry IV and which impel all of us to seek Heaven knows what and where.

You will realize the seriousness of this illness rampant in Paris when I tell you that Challenberg is turning lyrical: "You see, my poor darling," he told me the other day, "we are all mortal . . . ! Ah! We can bluff as much as we like, it won't get us far." This metaphysical depression having led to "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may . . ." I infer that Hélène and Marie-Laure have caught the same virus, old Time's flight, treated best in the convent or in bed . . . And so my dear André, although he has always had a one-track mind, gives himself up to the flesh as if it were his sacred duty, closely connected with ancestor worship, if I may judge by the stories he tells, during the tenderest moments of our rest periods, of a childhood spent with a grandmother in Lorraine . . .

However, don't get the idea that my cave man is becoming human. Dropping in unexpectedly last night, he found me with Richard who was there for his fortnightly courtship and had brought me a lovely hyacinth. After the usual polite chitchat Challenberg stopped in front of the flower and exclaimed, "Say, that's a funny pot of flowers . . . it reminds me of the obscene drawings we used to put up in the interns' room . . . one of the fellows had a knack for surrealism and was always sticking a phallus in a pot . . . What a joker, eh?" he asked, turning to Richard.

The latter, who has no talent for repartee, was staring in

dumfounded horror at his hyacinth, letting André describe other no less surrealistic calligraphies . . . Finally since the poor chap still wouldn't leave, the doctor opened his bag very gravely and took out a syringe which he put on the stove to boil.

"You can get undressed now," he informed me. "Where do you want it, arm or buttock?"

Before I could protest, Richard, stammering, stuttering and stumbling, was already out on the landing.

"Oh, the poor ass!" exclaimed Challenberg. "Of all the hairless . . . Oh, Sweetheart, it breaks my heart to see you waste time with a eunuch like him! . . ."

And since a gentleman must justify his boorishness by virile deeds, I looked just as tuckered out as Didier this morning . . . a condition which I accentuate by not using make-up. Since we vie to see which of us is the more exhausted, Didier pretends to have to look for his words and I brag about my dizzy spells. He insists he has eye trouble; I say I can't go to the hairdresser's because my head is so sensitive. Without cracking a smile we attribute these ills to our work.

"Watch out," Didier warned me, "you have a delicate health for, after all, you only work for Birnbaum"—a subtle way of letting me know I make too much fuss about only one partner while he is fighting on all the fronts.

"My dear chap," I replied, "you know very well it's all in the degree . . . and I'm passionately fond of my work."

Truthfully, the translations bore me more and more and if Georges didn't encourage me to keep going, I'd have given up long ago. I see him often and my pallor seems to attract him, for he looks at me at times with a quivering of the nostrils which indicates that trouble is not far off. In anticipation, I shall assume from now on a frank, healthy friendliness which cannot be taken two ways. But knowing

by experience that I have no gift for avoiding misfortunes, I am still nervous.

As for us, dear Cécile, I'm delighted by our new bond, for nothing brings people closer together than to have an equal share in the same man's lack of leisure time!

Your Albertine

Thursday the twentieth

Dear Albertine,

Must it be my role to make you lose your well-known naïveté every week? . . . Here is the latest note from Didier which will straighten out your ideas on springtime:

Dear Cécile, the situation is reversed! Our friends, who went to so much effort to get me into their beds, now don't know how to get me out. Certain now of their success, they want to show it off by appearing with me in public, and only good manners prevent them from meeting me at the door with their hat and gloves on . . .

But since, logically, they can't withhold today what they offered yesterday with such insistence, their solution is to wear me out as quickly as possible. Gone are the preambles and niceties: Virtuosity lends a helping hand to Technique to reduce the game to its minimum essentials and I go from one surprise to another . . . Most men don't realize that they look to specialists in the art for what they could obtain so easily from society women!

Besides, this new twist would amuse me if our plan didn't require me keeping out of the public eye; so to oblige the ladies to stay home I have had to take the initiative again. But it is in vain that I rack my imagination and seek inspiration in erotic literature; my performance is superfluous. These women, formerly so exacting, have become the most easily satisfied of mistresses. At

the first skirmish they feign such a complete defeat that to renew such an exploit would be presumptuous and—since the armistice is signed—why not go out for tea? In short, in order to keep them in my arms I am practically obliged not to touch them . . .

In such a predicament I naturally resort to talking but as soon as I open my mouth they smother me with kisses. I have no choice but to flee and when they suggest going to the opening of a new art exhibition, I leave them hurriedly, quoting Tagor's words: "That which is eternal in the minute becomes ephemeral and vain if we expose it to Time . . ."

If Didier can no longer talk, dear Albertine, he will perish. Hurry things along.

Affectionately,
Cécile

Monday the twenty-fourth

My dear Cécile,

We're going to rescue your Don Juan. Everything is set for next Friday. We will publicize our happiness at the première of "The Honor of Others" by Amédée Pichon, a play which should be a big success since it throws mud at certain political men, their Egerias and satellites. As it is also a satire of the bourgeois regime, everyone will be there to yell "bravo." Didier, who is a friend of Pichon's, arranged the invitations with the secretary of the theatre and he placed the Robert-Guichards next to the Challenbergs. He believes that the ladies will come with their husbands since their lover is not available.

To make a bigger splash Didier turned me over to one of his friends, a saleswoman at Herbin's, who will lend me one of the gowns in the collection. I chose "Dove's Feather"

with a "draped effect which follows a natural rhythm, leaving to the body all its youth and ease!" So much the better—I'll need both of them terribly. The finishing touch is a rhinestone necklace which your dear friend gave me, saying that with this gown he and I would be the only ones to know that the stones were false . . .

I confess I'm nervous. If only you were here to help me!
Love,

Albertine

P.S. I haven't the courage to see André, because I'd like to tell him the truth so that he won't suffer unnecessarily, but how can I tell him that his wife . . . besides, even if I dared to speak up he wouldn't keep it a secret and he'd spoil everything . . .

Wednesday the twenty-sixth

I'm awfully glad to learn that our friend's feats are soon to be over for he's at his last gasp . . .

As for you, sit tight until the big event and, for Heaven's sake, not a word to Challenberg. You'll explain everything to him later, if you insist on keeping him, which doesn't seem essential to me.

Didier tells me you look breathtaking in your gown and ready to act the part of the ingénue to perfection. Bravo! Write soon.

Cécile

Sunday, March 2, 11:00 A.M.

Dear Cécile,

It started out well. We arrived at the theatre at that unique moment on opening night when the "house" is full and the game consists in recognizing each other before the

curtain rises. Didier fixed it so that the usher would take us down to the front row, as if by accident, before leading us to our seats in a stage-box. I knew that our victims were seated in the middle of the fifth row; I had time to spot them. The two women were sitting together flanked by their husbands, Alfred on Hélène's left, André on Marie-Laure's right. The ladies were talking together. I noticed Hélène's bronzed neck and her short, wavy hair. Her blondness surprised me—I don't know why but I had always imagined the dear doctor's wife as a stocky brunette.

As soon as we had passed them, Didier stopped according to plan at the third row across the aisle to speak to one of his colleagues and give him a message from their mutual editor. I stood a little to one side until he turned back to me and took my arm affectionately. Although our backs were turned to them, our friends could not help seeing us. But the rules of the game were such that we were not allowed to see the expression on their faces at the first shock. For me, the best part was spoiled.

What went on during the two or three minutes it took us to reach our observation post we'll never know. I found the "never" hard to accept. I told Didier who replied brusquely that I knew nothing about the joys of the imagination. So be it—but his reply dampened my enthusiasm.

I turned my attention to the ladies who taught me another type of lesson: they were talking together very naturally, each one all ears for the other . . . Meanwhile, André was slumped in his seat and staring straight ahead. Hélène leaned over and said something to him laughingly. He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head with exasperation. Hélène then whispered something in Marie-Laure's ear which made her smile. The curtain went up. The play was amusing. Alfred and the ladies were enjoying it. Didier held my arm while thinking about himself. I was watching

André. "Look out," Didier murmured. "Don't stare at them like that, they'll be delighted." He was right, but I found him tiresome.

When the curtain came down we stayed in our box for quite a while pretending to be in love. Eventually Pichon saved us by inviting us to have a glass of champagne with him. On the way we saw our four friends chatting together. We looked the other way and so did they. When we returned to our box they were already in their seats but André had disappeared.

The curtain went up on the second act.

Didier, who knew the play by heart, carried on a literary conversation in a low voice with a young student whom Pichon had asked us to take into our box.

The ladies were gobbling up every word of the play. André was gone. I felt alone.

During the second interval we stayed in our box and a number of people came to see us.

Then it was the same story. Didier went on talking to the student. From time to time he would lean over and say encouragingly, "The ladies are green, you're so lovely!" and then back to his conversation. I admire men's talent for employing their time so usefully when they can't take us in their arms . . . !

At the last line we rushed backstage to be the first in Granval's dressing room. He arrived, still warm with success, royal and stentorian as if he were still playing his role . . . Suddenly a voice was heard above the hubbub of congratulations: "My little Granval," Hélène Challenberg cried. (It's funny how she enunciates her words like André!) "My little Granval, you're coming with me. Pichon and the whole gang will be at my home. André will be delighted, he was obliged to leave before the end of the play: an emergency. He was heartbroken . . . You were

spectacular. Come along, hurry up." And suddenly, putting her hand on Didier's shoulder, "You, too, my dear, you must come with us."

Didier introduced me. Hélène held out her hand with a smile and then gave Didier a look that was at once ferocious and delighted. "We're superior beings, aren't we?" she seemed to say. At least that's what Didier understood, for he bowed. Then, after a pause, he said in a gentle tone of voice, "Hélène, we're tired, so if you'll forgive us, we'll accept your invitation another time . . ." She took the rebuff with a slight blush but answered at once, "Fine, you run along but I'll be expecting you, both of you, very soon. All right?"

"She's remarkable," Didier sighed as he hurried me off. "If it weren't for your stupid affair with that vet., we could have had fun at her party!"

I tried to make conversation by saying I had been surprised by Hélène's graciousness in spite of the bluntness of her long face, and that I had had an entirely different conception of that type of woman . . . He simply said, "Oh, Albertine!" without deigning to go on with such a futile conversation.

He drove in silence straight to the Rue de Lille. "Forgive me," he said, "for abandoning you like this but I'm exhausted. I think I have a touch of quinsy, I feel feverish and it hurts to speak. The evening went off very well. You were adorable. We'll celebrate our success another time. I'll give you a ring tomorrow morning."

And so the evening which I had pictured ending in laughter and champagne finished in disappointment. I climbed the stairs, taking care not to dirty my borrowed gown, and I envied the "victims" who must have been spending a sparkling evening together. No sense in going into my thoughts about your Didier . . . I was just calling

him a worn-out intellectual when I saw, sitting on my doorstep, holding his knees with his hands—have you guessed?—my Challenberg!

He stood up and exclaimed, "Well, well, we come home early and unescorted, it's too much to ask!" I unlocked my door and he pushed me ahead of him into the room saying, "Hurry up, get in, let's have a little talk. You don't really think that that's all there is to it . . . You're pleased with yourself, eh? You've made me look perfectly ridiculous . . . even to my wife who thought it was funny as hell. But anyway that's a different story and that little Marie-Laure is going to hear from me soon. Ha! You can be proud of yourself, it's a good joke. Is that what you wanted, both of you? You make a great team, I must say. He looks more and more like a wet rag. He's a nice character, your Don Juan . . . So, you're off on him again? . . . Don't you remember how you felt a few months back? Well, I'm not going to make a fool of myself! After all, if that's what you want, that's your business . . ." and he took my arm, squeezing it hard. "Only, you see," he continued, "I'm through with you—I don't much care for little bitches like you."

Eventually I managed to get a word in and I asked him to refrain from using that tone on me. He lost all self-control and yelled, "By George, you're right, I'll change my tone, for with streetwalkers like you there aren't many methods!" and he slapped my face so hard it brought tears to my eyes. I said nothing for fear of really crying. I thought he was going to apologize but he went on: "There now, you can tell your Didier that I'm a bastard and a brute. He'll be delighted to pity you. Huh! You make me laugh, both of you. You're pathetic. It's enough to make one vomit . . . And to think that, stupid clot that I am, I thought you were different. But I was wrong. You're just as dumb as the others. I feel sorry for you. Oh well, that's your tough luck.

Have a good time with him!" and with this he left, slamming the door hard enough to wake the whole building.

And that, dear Cécile, is the true story of a triumphant evening...

I haven't seen André again. He hasn't telephoned. I expect Didier tonight: perhaps he'll have some amusing things to tell me. That would be too good to be true.

Love,

Albertine

Sunday, midnight

Dear Cécile, I must tell you the latest news straight away. Didier has just left: no more talk of quinsy. He has already seen both the ladies and the turn of events has brought the roses back to his cheeks.

For me, the news is less bracing but, *povera me*, I'm used to that.

The trouble began in the most unexpected quarter with André's visit to Marie-Laure. The good doctor broke into your aunt's room to tell her she was a nasty meddler. "What would *you* think of someone who went to your husband and gave him details about your private life? What would *you* call such a person?"

Seeing that Marie-Laure pretended astonishment, he told her she was wasting her time and that if she wanted to keep out of further trouble she'd better tell him at once what Hélène knew and what she, Marie-Laure, knew about the situation.

Marie-Laure told him about the bet.

Dear André rushed home to tell his wife she was degenerate and neuropathic. "If you're crazy that's your business, but leave my sex life alone."

Hélène learned in this way that Marie-Laure knew every-

thing. She telephoned Didier at once and asked him to call in. She received him with open arms: "So! my little Machiavelli, you knew about the bet. You played a double game to prove that you were smarter than any of us! Well, you succeeded. Bravo. I'm proud of you!" She kissed him roughly and then chuckled. "Of course, you have made me lose the bet, but I swear André's face this morning was worth the 100,000 francs. Believe me, it was a bargain." And she told him about André's outburst. "My little Didier, what a marvelous idea to take André's lollipop away from him. It's too funny. And when I think that for the same price I had the pleasure of three amusing weeks with you. You were a delicious lover, my dear, so varied . . . I couldn't believe it was you!"

Didier had forgotten only one thing in this witty description: I wasn't supposed to be aware of his performance with the two ladies—but never mind.

Marie-Laure, for her part, though less clever than Hélène, escaped with little injury. She scolded Didier for his lack of faith, for keeping secrets from her, but otherwise congratulated him on making Hélène lose the bet while, at the same time, protecting her own reputation. "I appreciate your tact, my dear, but you ought to have confided in me, because then I should have warned you about certain consequences of your behavior which your affectionate thoughtfulness did not foresee."

And she went on to describe in super-subtle terms what she calls my excesses, embroidering with refined details the tale of my scandalous life with André these past months: André taking me to group debaucheries and other strange activities . . . for the imagination of that saint is diabolic.

She ended by blaming Didier for exposing her to Challengberg's insults. At the very thought of him, she threw her-

self into your friend's arms, begging him to protect her from "that oaf."

The balance-sheet is clear. Didier, absolved and glorified, becomes the ladies' knight in shining armor. These two are closer than ever. Only poor André is mad at everyone—his mistress, his wife, his friends—because he alone was stupid enough to take my presence at the first night seriously. It's exactly the opposite of what I had hoped. But Didier seems so pleased with the results that I'm beginning to suspect that, with a little less foolishness, I might very well have foreseen the outcome.

What do you think?

Albertine

Friday, March 7

I think, dear Albertine, that you are foolish. You know very well that events always betray our expectations so why waste time wishing you could foretell the future. It is obvious, however, that all the chips are not down. Can't you see that your "poor André" is busy complicating the situation and that the others are trying to joke and minimize the whole thing for the precise reason that it is becoming serious? Didier is the first to be uneasy. He is afraid that he worked for André. He writes that that individual, lacking in humor and upbringing, was uneducated enough to mistake your comedy for a tragedy. It appears that Challengberg doesn't appreciate others' wit and goes around with such a black look that Hélène has an abominable suspicion. Everyone is beginning to consider the possibility of an unthinkable and disgusting detail: it may be that André is in love! If intelligent people can't have a little fun without some blundering idiot throwing his heart into the game, decent amusements are no longer possible!

It wouldn't have been so bad if that ill-bred fellow had made a few scenes and let it go at that . . . but that doesn't appear to satisfy him and his look of a wounded lion portends more trouble ahead. Watch out, Albertine. When a healthy, normal man falls in love he becomes dangerous.

Didier adds that even this wouldn't be so terrible if you, in your corner, didn't treat it like a catastrophe. "Dear Cécile," he writes, "I must confess I expected our little joke to put an end to Albertine's ridiculous affair. I was foolish enough not to foresee the risk of bringing them closer together. More than anything, my dear, I fear reconciliations."

You can see that as far as forecasts go, you're not the only one to think himself deluded by events. Please, Albertine, once and for all, stop thinking things over or you're going to get into more hot water.

Keep your chin up.

Love,
Cécile

Tuesday, five o'clock

Dear Cécile, don't worry any longer—the worst has happened.

André came here last night. He was very calm and wearing a dark suit I didn't recognize. He had announced his visit in a letter in which he blamed me for not telling him about the bet in an effort to protect certain people who were not worth any consideration. "We'll talk about all that, my poor darling; you have behaved foolishly but I haven't taken good care of you—I promise that I'll do better in the future." Signed: "Your André."

I was curious and even eager to see him again, because I was tired of playing games with Didier where nothing ever happens. With André I can be sure of the reverse.

He sat down on the divan after placing me in an arm-chair in front of him. "In forty-five minutes I must be at the Medical School so please let me say what I have to say. You can think about it later . . . Well now, you know how over-worked I am. I must get to the essential and the essential is to hold you in my arms. You're still too young to know that I am right."

He admitted, however, that he hadn't given me enough entertainment. "You're a very surprising young woman. You look like a harmless enough little animal but, when you come right down to it, you're a woman!"

This discovery made him reflect for a moment.

"Yes, you're a woman," he continued. "You like to have your little games and you need attention. Of course I'm an imbecile. You're even an intelligent woman. I admit I admired the way you made fools of those two battle-axes. No, don't protest. *Hélène* is the crazier of the two, but you really bowled me over. Well, now, let's get back to what I was saying. So I must attend to you or lose you. There's no question of the latter. I have just realized how much I need you and, what's more, I can't go on wasting my time on such idle games. All right, here's what we're going to do: you, nothing; me, I'm going to get my business in order; there are a few practical questions to settle . . ."

I tried to speak but he stopped me with a wave of his hand and continued, "You see, my darling, I've had enough of this kind of life, I'm killing myself running to and fro between two homes. What's the use of it?—*Hélène* will never understand. I'm tired, *Albertine*. I need to plan—to build, damn it, like everyone else . . . I've been too patient with *Hélène*, but that's all over with now. There's something more in life than getting ahead. Anyhow, I've succeeded.

"There now, be happy and try not to see too much of that fellow *Marèze*. You had a good laugh, that's fine, I under-

stand, but that's enough now. Well, there it is, my darling. Now I must be off."

"... but, André."

"Darling, you can talk to me another day. I'm late already. Sleep well, I love you, so there!" And he kissed me.

Now it is my turn, Cécile, to say "and there it is!" . . . Nothing more disagreeable could have happened to me, because I don't love him though I'm fond of him. It's true that I'm always relieved to see him go, but it's also true that I'm always very happy to see him again . . . Try to understand and write to me, please. I'm so upset. I assure you that if I had known our little comedy with Didier would end in a proposal of marriage I would never have accepted the role of Célimène and I'd have stayed at home!

Your Albertine

Friday the fourteenth

Certainly, my love, for an introduction into libertine life, a marriage proposal does not speak well for the future. In any case, it was not "But, André . . ." that was needed but rather a reminder that you were already married. This poor excuse would at least have permitted you to interrupt him.

While you are bewailing your plight, André is taking action. Didier received an urgent summons from Hélène, for the situation is serious. Challenberg made another scene, much worse than the others. He accused her of having married him for her own interests and to have gone her own way on the pretext that she had brought him money and her father's name. He told her that their marriage was a swap—"money for a façade"; that the appearance of respectability he gave her had enabled her to devote herself entirely to her tastes which she otherwise would never have dared to do so openly and insolently; that she had never

loved him; that she had never done anything for him; that she never wondered how he managed all alone in Paris while she was traveling with her little girl friends.

Finally, he mentioned a "sentimental swindle"—the term was precise and hit home—and he left her no choice but to get a divorce.

The threat wouldn't have bothered anyone if he hadn't added that he was going to marry you. Hélène smiled, so he insisted angrily that you were the woman he needed; a young woman who was healthy, gentle, obedient, and who would give him fine children.

"I'm going to tell everyone to go to hell," he yelled, "and we'll live in the suburbs, in a house with a big garden where I can find peace when I come home at night. Ten years of poisoned air, thank you, that's enough for me. I need green grass and trees. A healthy life, sports, kids, that's what I want. I've had enough of your little intrigues with impotents."

Albertine, you must speak to him. By letting him get involved deeply you'll make more of a fool of him—when he's the only sincere person in this whole business and the only one you care anything about. Hélène is trying to gain time by refusing to discuss money matters. As you know, she owns part of the stock in the laboratory. But if you don't intervene, he's capable of abandoning his rights and Hélène might well accept a settlement by which her independence and her bank account would benefit.

It may be that the life of the second Madame Challengberg tempts you! In any event, make up your mind and if you haven't the courage to speak to him, write to your doctor and then come and spend a few days incognito with us in Bordeaux.

Affectionately,

Cécile

You're right, Cécile, the situation is becoming ridiculous. I wrote to André that I had to go to Bordeaux for family reasons . . . He was very nice about it. He simply asked me to put off my departure for a day or two. He's leaving for some convention or other in Montpellier and he wanted me to go with him. From there he would have driven me to Bordeaux. "It isn't the shortest way, sweetheart, but I swear it would be the nicest . . . !"

I refused, pleading the urgency of my trip.

He came for a farewell visit during which, at my request, "we talked about nothing." But you know that André likes nothing better than to do away with talking when he's with me and I'm afraid our silence didn't quite have the significance it should have had . . .

Anyhow, he believes I left yesterday. Nothing is more unpleasant than to be here without being here . . . I was going round in circles so I welcomed Marie-Laure who came up to tell me I wasn't looking well. Apart from this little slap she was sweet, even forgetting for once to exhibit the refinements of her soul. Perhaps misfortune has improved her?

She told me that I should have a change of air, that life in Paris was too hectic, that one should take time to rest . . . and when I replied that I had nowhere to go for a rest she suggested arranging a week end for me at the home of some charming friends: "As a matter of fact, Georges is leaving on Saturday for the Herbins'. I'll fix it up. He'll be delighted to take you with him. He won't be in your way and he is a good driver!"

I accepted. I don't care about any secret motives your aunt may have . . . it may only be that she needs my room for the week end. For once her needs coincide with mine.

A little fresh air will do me good. After all, today is the first day of spring!

I must run out and buy some decent pajamas and slippers.

I hope that this little escapade will give me a new outlook on life. I'll tell you all about it.

Albertine

Friday night

Just a hasty note, Albertine, because I want this letter to reach you in time. Don't go to the Herbins'. They are also friends of the Challenbergs' and it is better for you not to be talked about just now. You can get some fresh air later . . . Besides, the air at the Herbins' is not very pure.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Monday, March 24

Dear Cécile,

I found your letter on my return from the Herbins'. It served only to show me how right you were.

I left with Georges on Saturday about five o'clock. He looked happy and surprised: "I would never have believed six months ago that I could one day take you to spend a week end with people like the Herbins—you seemed so innocent!"

Seeing my apprehension, he quickly reassured me by explaining that the Herbins were charming but rather fast and very sophisticated. This did not sound particularly alarming so I relaxed and looked at the scenery; the countryside was still winter-brown but the first mildness of spring was already in the air.

"You'll see what a pretty place it is," Georges said, "with

the garden overlooking the Seine. The house was one of those old farms that Parisians buy for a song before going bankrupt fixing them up. Michelle Herbin is an architect and she got some lovely effects with the old beams and stones."

When we arrived I admired the dark beams, the stone fireplace, the reddish-brown wood paneling on the walls of the entrance hall. The hostess, a slim young woman in slacks, smiled at my enthusiasm. She took me to my room and told me that dinner was at eight, and that until then I could do as I liked—sleep, go for a walk, do nothing at all, or join them downstairs.

"A few people have already arrived," she said. "You'll find us in the library."

I inspected my room, which was a small one under the eaves with wood paneling and supported by an oblique beam. A divan occupied most of the room and I dropped onto it. The late afternoon light varnished the walls with gold. I slipped under the fur blanket. It was warm. André and all the rest of the comedy seemed to belong to some distant past. The perfume of the wood and the warmth must have put me to sleep for a little while: when I opened my eyes it was dark. A murmur of voices and laughter reached me. I changed quickly and followed the sound downstairs to the library.

At the far end of the room, in front of a fireplace framed by bookshelves carved in the stone, about ten people were chatting in small groups.

Michelle Herbin came forward and, taking me by the arm, led me around to meet everyone. I was too intimidated to see faces or hear names. Someone behind me exclaimed, "My dear Herbin, this is the young woman who carried off the prize for you at the last *première*. She was wearing one of your gowns, the prettiest one."

Hélène Challenberg! I was rooted to the spot with astonishment; then my pleasure at seeing a familiar face carried me toward her. Laughing, she caught me by the wrist and led me to the host, a tall fellow with clear eyes which scrutinized me. I had the horrible sensation of being too fat in last season's frock.

"Come along," Hélène said, "let's attend to you a little," and led me to the divan where she placed me between Herbin and herself, drawing a fur rug over our laps. It was at this point that I noticed, sitting on a cushion at Hélène's feet, a young woman with a long smooth face who was absent-mindedly jiggling the ice in her whiskey.

Michelle Herbin put a glass in my hand.

"Drink up and wake up," Hélène said. "You look like a bewildered little fox"—and she returned to her conversation with Herbin. Her leg pressed against mine and my head rested against Herbin's shoulder. Squeezed thus between those two who were talking together without paying much attention to me, I felt protected and I recovered enough confidence to ask Hélène the names of the guests I had met earlier. She pointed out the film director Piéchu and his wife, the actor Jean Castelnau, Yvette Barré who is Pichon's interior decorator, two unknown authors and her young friend, one of Herbin's models.

Georges was leaning against the mantel chatting with a heavily built man whose hair frothed up on each side of a bald head and who spoke in a rapid, metallic voice, punctuated with shrill laughter surprising in a man of his size.

"That's Chonchon," Hélène told me, "Herbin's head dress designer. The beauty of our bodies appeals to his intelligence only, but he is so intelligent that he dresses us wonderfully anyway."

I watched Chonchon sketch rounded shapes in space.

"A couturier's only preoccupation," he was saying to

Georges, "is this: will this gown make a man long to undress the woman wearing it? If it does, it is a success."

Hélène leaned toward me. "In that case, yours was a masterpiece."

I turned crimson. I couldn't forget that I had snatched a husband and a lover from this woman and I admired the ease with which she made light of the situation. I was beginning to wonder if you hadn't exaggerated the scene André made . . . when the doorbell rang and Michelle Herbin rushed out, crying, "At last! To think that he can never be on time."

"He" was Didier.

I thought I was dreaming, Cécile, and Didier was no less astounded for he stopped and stared in disbelief at the trio before him: Herbin, Hélène and me reclining on the divan.

But our hostess was already directing us to the dining room. On the way in Didier took me by the arm and asked in a low voice:

"With whom did you come?"

"Georges."

He appeared relieved. "You ought to have let me know and I would have brought you. That idiot is going to imagine that he has some claim on you."

We dined by candlelight at a long Spanish table in front of a wood fire. The champagne was good. Herbin, on my left, kept refilling my glass. Chonchon, on my right, was holding my hand and promising to design dresses for me. One of the authors invited me to a reading of his new play. Piéchu, for my benefit, outlined the plot of his next film. I was the toast of the evening and was under the delicious impression that all these people were nice and found me nice.

Didier was his gay self again. He dragged Georges wit-

tingly through the mud, congratulating him on bringing me and asking if it meant repentance.

"Repentance, indeed!" scolded Chonchon. "That's easily said, but to repent you must have a vocation. Little Georges here has always played a double game. Look," he said to me, "he's been torturing me for ten years. I haven't been lucky with this generation. They're a bunch of grabbers while I am the gentle type. There is a romantic side in me which isn't fashionable these days. They want toughies and bullies . . . But if you could have seen what a handsome hussar Georges made at the beginning of that funny war!" He turned to Castelnau: "I had little three-quarter length, fur-lined overcoats made for Jean and him, nipped in at the waist with a big collar à la Mary Queen of Scots . . . real wasp waists. Do you remember, Jean? Oh, my pussies, you were a-dor-a-ble! Jean asked for a special little inside pocket to hold his compact—his nose, you know, is apt to become shiny, the poor darling . . ."

I began to understand. Didier laughed when he saw my face. Everyone began to tell stories of ambiguous love where the masculine and feminine genders no longer made sense. As I listened to the laughter mingle with the tinkle of crystal, I drank in a sort of rapture, certain that I was reaching a higher plane, a lift made up of perversity and depravity.

We got up from the table. Chonchon took Georges and Castelnau by the arms, crying, "Come along, you scamps," and pulled them toward the library. We found our places on the divans under furs. This time I was next to Didier. Piéchu was sitting on the floor telling stories. I saw that Hélène was caressing the smooth nape of the woman with the long face who was once again seated at her feet. The wood fire evoked memories of other wood fires and my first evenings with your friend. I felt his arm around my shoulders. Someone started playing records. There was dancing.

Without knowing how, I found myself in Didier's arms. Soon we were alone. He was murmuring to me, I heard nothing, engrossed as I was in a new and yet familiar confusion which was coming back . . .

And this is how, dear Cécile, the worst has once again happened. I have tried to describe events objectively. I am sick of the whole business. It is nothing but illusions.

I believe I am going to marry André. It is wisest.

Albertine

Wednesday the twenty-sixth

Albertine, what has wisdom to do with the situation? Has Challenberg destroyed your love of pleasure? Just when your prayers are answered: wood fires, the exoticism of Parisian life, an adept lover, you speak of marriage. What am I saying, of remarriage! I am beginning to suspect that, in your indolence, you like endings better than beginnings and that you want love rather than loves . . . ?

But to get back to Didier; tell me about the event which I persist in considering a happy one in spite of the circumstances—the only event which has really made me happy since your arrival in Paris.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Sunday

Dear Cécile,

Only modesty kept me from explaining what I called Wisdom, but since you insist on having all the details, here they are:

We were dancing—a very romantic tango. I had drunk too much . . . and it was Didier.

When he led me to my room the music from the long-playing record followed us all the way. In front of my door he kissed me—I think I turned the doorknob myself. Still kissing me, he took me in his arms and carried me to the bed, just like the heroes in old time novels!

He undressed me slowly, carrying out the preliminary rites with nonchalant skill. He caressed me in such a way that the most banal seemed like improvisations. "Sweet, my sweet one, you are made for love, you're perfect," he whispered. I was surprised that he had guessed so quickly how to please me and I didn't wonder at the subtleties he indulged in. I abandoned myself happily to his caprices and, certain of my future pleasure, I wasn't annoyed by the delay. But you know my generous nature. I wanted to share my pleasure with this excessively patient lover. I called him: he came to me but almost at once dropped by my side with an exclamation of annoyance; then he returned to those slow caresses which were now insulting. On the verge of hysterics, I pushed him away, struggling with him. He imposed a deliverance which I no longer wanted. We lay still for a long time, being careful not to talk. At last he fell asleep. I was cold and the fire had gone out. I slipped under the covers and pulled the fur blanket over me, but I was so thirsty I couldn't sleep. I cursed the champagne and did my best not to blame the man sleeping restlessly beside me.

Nothing more needs to be said about my excellent health, Cécile, for I woke at dawn, rested and refreshed. I threw myself into Didier's arms and he welcomed me with moderate enthusiasm—undoubtedly, he would have preferred to sleep—but as your dear friend is a gentleman, he lavished on me attentions which I accepted in all simplicity. Unfortunately our professional seducer can't have found in his sleep the ingredients of that morning vigor

which Challenberg claims is automatic in all normal men. Talk about puttering around!—excuse that expression, one of André's of course—for there are limits to a woman's patience. Indeed, at the final moment our precious lover had a fit of coughing and got out of bed quickly.

"These country houses are never heated enough," he grumbled, and fumbling in his coat pocket, he took a cough drop from a box and began sucking it. Then he bundled himself up in a blanket and walked hesitantly around the room.

He sat on the bed, gave me a little kiss on the eyelids and said, "We're really awfully tired, little Albertine; there are days like that . . . I think I should let you sleep . . ."

He gathered up his clothes and went into the bathroom to dress. He returned to pull the sheet gently up to my chin. "Get some sleep now," he said and left.

I watched him go without saying a word. Sleep! Really now! All the adjectives that André had used for him came back to mind. André, dear André, he was right after all; it's funny how doctors sense those things . . . I had been silly enough to think it was jealousy! . . . I decided then, in a rush of tenderness, to make André happy forever. This good thought was repaid by a providential dream which made up agreeably for reality. I awoke full of forgiveness and laughed at the thought that perhaps unknowingly I possessed that sensuality of the mind which is the sounding board of pleasure! The scorn I felt for Didier changed gradually into charitable pity. After a delicious breakfast served in my room by Chonchon, I resolved to approach our dialectician with the precaution and tact required for people who are very ill.

We met again at lunch. I put on a simple, gay and contented smile which I quickly realized was unnecessary. Our great man didn't seem uncomfortable. He was brilliant,

juggling with words and ideas as usual. His cheekiness made me forget my tactful resolutions. When he spoke of his Treatise on Intention, I smiled. I smiled again when he said, "Truth, there is the enemy." And I didn't stop smiling because the gentleman never stopped quoting himself! He was worse than usual and as he was going on with his little witticisms after lunch, I went outside with Georges to look at the rock garden. I asked him to drive me back to Paris and at three o'clock we said good-by to our hosts who were a little surprised by this hurried departure on a Sunday afternoon.

Georges didn't ask any questions. I was uncomfortable after what I had learned about his private life so we talked about anything but ourselves.

André will be back in two or three days. I am impatient to see him again. It's about time I settled down to serious matters.

Love,
Albertine

Tuesday, April 1

My dear Albertine,

Until now you have been a very spoilt young woman, but if you wish to go on living in a fanciful world, you must face the fact that pleasure also has its ups and downs. Your sarcastic remarks are uncalled for, since Didier has worn himself out this last month as much for your amusement as his. A failing due to exhaustion and emotion is perfectly normal, even flattering, and why doubt a reputation sanctioned by women of taste?

Be careful, Albertine. You are so determined that black shall be black and white very white—"a place for everything and everything in its place"—that you must have re-

turned from the week end persuaded that Didier is impotent and Georges homosexual. Believe me, I'm sorry but it's not that simple, darling! . . .

I'm much more suspicious of the circumstances which brought together at the Herbins' Didier, Hélène and you under the patronage of Marie-Laure. I'm writing to Didier to get to the bottom of it. These coincidences are never entirely accidental. For the time being, you should avoid everyone.

Affectionately,
Cécile

Thursday, April 3

My dear Cécile,

I hadn't told you that Didier phoned the night I got back and that he came over the next evening. This extra information will allow you to examine more thoroughly the state of our relationship.

Our friend arrived with a smile and took my hands, looking at me with mock severity as one does a child whom one doesn't really intend to punish. "Albertine," he said at last, "you must be very charming to be forgiven your clumsiness. I've already told you that anyhow."

I admit I was surprised, after the night we had spent together two days before, to hear him speak of my clumsiness and to be put in the wrong. Didier then reassured me. "Come here, and don't sulk. There is nothing really wrong since I am here."

Indeed—oh miracle!—the master was there and he forgave me . . .

We sat down—I on my divan, he in the armchair. He poured us a whiskey and lit a cigarette. After a comfortable silence he began to chuckle:

"Did you know, my dear, that thanks to you I've learned a lot these past two days . . . ? For the other night, when you come right down to it, I lost my last virginity, that of my virile honor. Now I'm a real man of letters. It's a memorable day."

He explained to me that until then, never having experienced that little annoyance—common as it was—a whole aspect of masculine psychology had escaped him. "For example, Montaigne's famous chapter on the uncertainty of amorous victories had always seemed dull and rambling to me. I re-read it last night and I discovered some very subtle things.

"Ah! my dear, you have humanized me so much . . ." He leaned over and kissed the palms of my hands with gratitude. "Take the case of *Stendhal*," he said, raising his head. "Doesn't that explain his skepticism and that rather aggressive personality? His passionate temperament made him particularly subject to that misfortune which, by the way, happens to the most self-assured men. Apropos, did you know about *Mérimée's* fiasco? . . ." and he told me about the night spent with *Georges Sand*. "Well, my dear, it was an awful mix-up. No one knows which of the two was the more insulted at not giving in to the other; all Paris was up in arms about it . . . Don't you see, my dear, that it is really a question of hurt pride? Actually, a woman attaches less importance to that detail than you realize; I have only to point out *Héloïse's* love for *Abélard* . . ."

Didier fixed us another drink and he seemed delighted. I was pondering—I forgot to quote *Diderot*, a little dig I had promised myself while listening to this lecture on impotence as found in French literature—and wondering if women really did attach so little importance to that "detail" and if I was normal. Didier must have been thinking along the same lines for he said, "Ah, dear *Albertine*, you're

still a very little girl!" Then he came over to me shaking his head as though he thought the pleasures that were in store for me were unmerited.

He kissed me with his eyes closed. After a deep breath he told me that I was earthy. I had the presence of mind to reply that I was very sorry it wasn't true.

"Oh yes you are, my dear. The real woman, the original woman, can be found in you. Believe me, there's something about you that is primitive, wild, a strange animal poetry, a grace which allows you to see the world with primeval freshness . . . Dear, my dear," he continued, "you're a young Eve or a nymph, who knows . . ." This time he kissed me with his eyes open and our looks clashed before blending together. I thought I had won this match—I wanted revenge for his indifference the other night—but instead I was told that it would be nice to be shipwrecked in order to see me hanging out my royal father's laundry. . . . "Nausicaä, Nausicaä, isn't that a ravishing word? It's all the newness of desire, the last days of virginal modesty, her waiting for the man." He stroked my forehead as if to console me for having soon to bear the male yoke . . .

He undressed me religiously. My nudity suddenly transformed his rural lyricism into marine lyricism: "My little siren, my little sea-nymph," he murmured, "Oh, how I'd like to take you in running water! You're beautiful, Albertine, dainty and smooth like a young goddess and I swear to you that I am not, like the king of Ithaca, bound to a post, and nothing will keep me . . ." With his other hand—if I may say so, for as he spoke he drew round shapes in the air, hugged imaginary forms—so with the other hand he got undressed. "Ah! At last," he sighed. "That clothing was unbearable . . . Albertine, there is something about you of the dryad, who enjoys torturing the satyrs and the gods. I'd like to be both to experience with you, one

after the other, the most brutal pleasures and the most extravagant variations . . .”

So I was nymph, siren, naiad, king's daughter and goddess, but still nothing happened. Exhausted from having loved all those divinities of water and forest our Didier rested on my breast. At last he jumped up and turned me over roughly, grabbed me by the nape of the neck and held tight—but Mother Nature's treachery obliged him to end this faunal attempt in tenderness.

It was a horrible moment. Twelve centuries of erotic literature weighed on us.

In vain did our hero try to divert our attention with other games, just as Greek although more easily performed, but I had had enough laughs for one day and I got out of bed impatiently. I slipped on a coat and threw him my peignoir. “Let's talk for a while,” I suggested. This astonishing phrase didn't astonish him at all but it vexed him. “That's a good one,” he retorted. “When you say you want us to talk, what you really mean is that you want me to talk, because, if I'm not mistaken, you expect me to do all the work around here!”

Cécile, after entertainment like that I'm afraid life will seem awfully dull to me. I wonder how I can find a way to tell André about it, for I have no right to keep this joke from him. He'll enjoy it so. I think I'll tell him that Didier tried to rape me . . . but wasn't able to! He will certainly forgive me. How unfair I've been to André. You can't imagine how much I want to see him. I'm going to try to straighten things out and tell him that marriage is always a disappointment and that we're much happier as we are. If only he would take me to the theatre now and then it would be perfect. As for Didier, suggest to him this new subject for a lecture: “Ulysses' Voyages: A Sounding Board of Sensuality!”

We separated rather coldly but without recriminations. On the landing your dear friend summed up the situation as follows: "Ah! I wonder how all this will affect my writing..."

You can see, dear Cécile, that if pleasure has its ups and downs, work, on the other hand, is always up.

Yours,

Albertine

Saturday, April 5

My dear Cécile,

Instead of a visit from André I received this letter:

Dear Albertine, my wife has very obligingly brought me up to date on your latest activities at the Herbins' . . . They exceed every expectation. My plans must have given you a good laugh! But I ought to have remembered sooner that you willingly sleep with anyone, wherever you are at the moment. You're entirely right. Your first attempts suggest a promising future. After all, each one according to his ability.

I won't even accuse you of wasting my time since before I knew you I was already accustomed to easy women.

I would simply like to point out that from now on you are going to travel with a crowd where success doesn't depend on easiness alone.

Good luck anyway.

Signed: "Challenberg"

I don't know what thoughts this letter can bring to a distinguished mind like yours . . . But *I* cried with rage and I assure you that Monsieur Marèze's sham demonstrations no longer made me want to laugh. To think that it is for that faker that I have been so grossly insulted by André.

Naturally our meeting at the Herbins' must have been arranged, but I'll never be able to make André believe it. Besides, after his letter, I couldn't bear to see him again.

Anyway, all's well that ends badly. Here we are, each of us alone. Bad or good, I don't know. I'm in a daze; above all, I've had enough. André was the only man who may really have loved me. It's a fine mess.

Albertine

Wednesday, April 9

Brutality, Albertine, can also be a manifestation of suffering and what did you expect of André Challengberg after what you did. This "fine mess" is your fault and not mine as you hint. I advised you to tell André that you didn't want a divorce and then to come to me in Bordeaux. You replied that I was right but you did nothing. You gave yourself the impression of doing something by writing your lover a letter which avoided the issue and you let him pay you a visit which, as I understand it, ended in the pleasantest way possible. After that you went off to the Herbins'. A less distinguished mind than mine could speak of your indecision, subterfuges, mental restrictions . . . and what have you? Anyhow, André doesn't have to know how little enjoyment you got from being unfaithful to him!

Forgive me for talking to you this way but you are the very incarnation of feminine disorder, living for an event without ever being satisfied by it, and always wanting something—but something else . . . You give to the highest bidder, but whatever you are offered—pleasure, regret, speeches, insults—you are never happy. Albertine, a few women like you and it's easy to understand that Hamlet wasn't mad when he said to Ophelia: "Get thee to a nunnery!"

In a word, my dear, if you want to live in a state of permanent shock, so be it. And to do this, you treat men like emotion-giving machines. That's all right too. But then don't give them more importance than a machine. I had thought the implicit assumption in this story was that Dr. Challenberg's feelings counted for very little. If I'm wrong, nothing is easier for you than to get him back by acting the innocent victim. Actually this would only be a half-lie, because I have proof that my suspicions were well-founded. I'm sending you Didier's letter. Believe me, the ladies' revenge is hard for me to swallow, but, please, don't do anything about it for the moment. We must think.

Affectionately,

Cécile

Didier's Letter:

My dear Cécile, Yes, it was all arranged and my exhaustion—that lame excuse—is the only explanation I can find for my lack of discernment. The profession of thinker, my dear, is the worst of them all. You're not forgiven the slightest absent-mindedness and Hélène, telling me how she and Marie-Laure had organized the week end at the Herbins', gloated with an insolence which might have offended me if I hadn't remembered that she has ten years more experience than I have. She said, "The trap was so obvious that when I saw you dancing with that child and understood that the evening would end as I wanted, I was ashamed of you."

I asked her if it was dishonorable to spend an evening with a young and charming . . . but she interrupted by retorting that she and I had long since passed the stage of sleeping "with" to that of sleeping "against, for, in spite of, or for the sake of."

"In this case it was for my sake," she said. She explained that André's behavior had ceased to amuse her, that the only way to settle the business was to prove to him that I really was Albertine's lover. "Now," she went on, "I knew this wasn't so. How would you have had the time between Marie-Laure and me? Of course, it would have been amusing to ask you to become her lover as a favor to me, but I know you: you would become a woman's lover to insult her but not to help out another woman. It was thus necessary to take you by surprise . . ." "Besides," she added, "your complicity with that little goose was beginning to annoy me a bit, I must admit."

When I protested she tousled my hair and with that brusque smile which, unfortunately, has not yet lost all its power, she said, "No, it's true, my dear. I was a little jealous . . . I like to rule, it's my weakness."

I assured her that it had been delightful to be trapped by her and that, what was more, the defeat had been a pleasure in itself! . . . To be frank, my dear Cécile, the latter is not entirely true for I was far from spectacular that famous night. The presentiment of a trap had robbed me of all spontaneity and I'm afraid I disappointed Albertine who, to tell the truth, likes in love only the banal aspects. There is a curious incompatibility between her humoristic intelligence and the conventionality of her needs. I think I can say that your friend is not made for the type of life she would like to lead. She has, without realizing it, a leaning toward good, a desire for the absolute, a sense of moral values—in short, a morality of the soul which clashes with the temptations of her mind. If you add to that the banality of her temperament—animal-like, submissive, which will blossom out in a climate of routine—it makes you wonder if it wouldn't be wiser for her to give up frivolity. This is what I would tell her if I were not in a position forbidding

any action resembling a lesson! In any event, it is not with her that I would start off on another phase of a game such as the one which is perpetually going on between Hélène and me.

For the time being, Hélène is several points ahead. I admire her for knowing how to use my revenge for her own purposes by leading me to put on the shoe which I had previously only pretended to wear. I never would have believed that a woman could consent to be publicly jilted by her lover for the sake of defeating him in secret.

And that, dear Cécile, is the end of our little game, the details of which I will give you at Easter if you are kind enough to allow me once again to pay you a visit of affectionate friendship.

I kiss your hands.

Didier

Saturday

You tell me we must think, dear Cécile? About what? About a means of making me even more ridiculous? Or of having me be more thoroughly insulted? Marie-Laure paid me a friendly visit last night which leads me to believe that it isn't possible. . .

I hadn't seen your aunt since the historic week end she so carefully arranged; she pretended to be ill to avoid seeing me. I admit that your suspicions and then Monsieur Marèze's epistolary masterpiece took away all desire to renew my visit. I had decided to keep quiet for your sake and because it was wisest. But didn't each of the organizers of the little party at the Herbins' want to collect her reward? Marie-Laure's salary could only be moral, so she came to see me: her speech—long, devious, and yet well done—can be outlined briefly because I don't feel much

like laughing this afternoon. It is enough to say that your kind aunt is paying dearly for her charitable attitude toward me in refusing to admit what was so obvious to everyone: my misbehavior. She has been cruelly punished for not wanting to forsake a fellow creature. My shame has fallen on her for having sheltered and helped me—but that is the least part of her punishment. She suffers most of all for being suspected by her best friends whose married life I have seriously endangered—the Challenbergs', of course! To say nothing of my having broken the most sacred laws of hospitality at the Herbins'.

She was still talking on the landing about her confusion, her scruples, her sadness, of the duties which are more important than those of mere indulgence, and I thought the act was over but she went on: "Of course, I won't ask you to leave tonight, nor tomorrow. There's no question of that, absolutely no question, Albertine. You must have time to find a little apartment which pleases you where at long last you will be really at home. And I promise I'll come and see you. We'll talk about all that later. I would so much like to help you..."

Surprise made me speechless and the biting retorts to suit the occasion occurred to me too late. It is probably better that way.

This morning I took two rooms in a hotel on the Quai Voltaire, since one doesn't always have a nunnery handy and since small flats where one can feel really at home are rare in Paris. Everything is fixed. I have come back here only to pack my things. I'm writing to you on the window sill overlooking my rooftops . . . This is my last act in this room which I have liked a lot although I haven't been happy here. Didier is right. I'm a nice girl with simple emotions, at the moment of leaving, I feel sad . . . My departure has at least one good thing to recommend it; it

keeps me from thinking about your friend's letter and, above all, keeps me from thinking about Hélène Challengberg whom I should like to see in her grave! . . .

But for the present I have more prosaic problems. I don't know what to do with my furniture. I'd like to keep it, but the hotel doesn't want it so I must store it somewhere. I'll have time later to reflect on all the kind things people say to me.

In case my cup is not yet running over, I wanted to give you my new address.

Albertine

Thursday, April 17

My dear Albertine, I wrote to Didier saying that he shouldn't come down because I had invited you long ago for the Easter holidays and that you would certainly not be pleased to see him just now . . . This would not be untrue if you were willing to come down. My aunt's attitude is a direct slap in the face for me since it was I who sent you to her, and I'd like to have you near me to console you and make you laugh at your so-called misfortunes.

You're not ridiculous, my dear; you are not insulted; and, believe me, you are not victimized. Marie-Laure pushed you into a trap in order to turn you out afterwards: the method is shabby but all's fair in love and war. Can you have forgotten so soon that three weeks after she told you she was going to take Didier back as her lover you made a public display of snatching him away from her? The grace with which the ladies accepted their punishment did not mean that they wouldn't try to retaliate. Didier, who is a better sport than you are, didn't think of complaining. When one has a passion for games, defeats can also be en-

tertaining. But you are like a child who enjoys the victory only, that is to say . . . "the banal aspects."

Albertine, how could you fail to laugh at Didier's letter? I must admit that I admired the way he adapted your personality to justify his failure, which he was obliged to mention, suspecting that you wouldn't keep it from me. To think that for ten years that poor fellow passed himself off in my eyes as a specialist in love: the Professional Seducer! Yet how well he can talk about it . . .

But to get back to your character traits. I infer that a temperamental and submissive animal can work wonders in Paris, since in six months you have succeeded in turning two families topsy-turvy, in capturing two men-about-town, and in staggering two women of the world. The balance sheet up to date is by no means disastrous for your ego.

The problem is simple: you won the first match; the ladies carried off the second; the important one remains, and you can and ought to win it by bringing Challenberg back. He loves you or he wouldn't have insulted you. Hélène succeeded in getting him into her team by telling him about your infidelity, but nothing is more fragile than an association built on spite. You can doubtless find a pretext for seeing André. Tell him you don't understand such a complicated chain of events which you were dragged into by older women who wanted to separate the two of you. Above all, don't try to explain or justify your actions. Be scornful and hide behind a wall of silence. Your excellent health will do the rest . . . men often find it to their advantage to believe in the innocence of young and edible women.

Let yourself be gobbled up, Albertine; only Hélène will have indigestion for, though she doesn't want her husband, she doesn't want anyone else to have him. This is natural and we are all more or less dogs in the manger.

us, seems meaningless, so far from the heart, from the soul . . . Life is simpler than that.

Forgive me for these bourgeois comments but I'm weary tonight. These last few days, while I have been running around Paris settling material questions, I have often thought about the story Count Molé tells in his *Souvenirs*. His father had been arrested a little before the September massacres. The news of the massacres spread like wild fire. Madame Molé, in desperation, succeeded in bribing a former servant to go to the nearby headquarters and give his word that Citizen Molé was not an aristocrat. Red tape . . . obstacles. At last the magistrate was freed and a group of sans-culottes took him to his home. Madame Molé, on seeing her husband, couldn't control herself; she ran to him and threw herself into his arms, sobbing. One of the escorts is said to have exclaimed at this sight, "Ah, citizens, how right we were to liberate that man. You can see they are not aristocrats. They love each other! . . ."

It's a lovely story, isn't it, Cécile? What a pity the heart and the mind are like strength and the road traveled—one diminishes as the other grows. I would have liked to meet the man who could prove the contrary . . .

I left Jacques, who was good and kind, because he lacked imagination in love. He loved too many other things besides me: his work, his house, his rest, his family and useful relations . . . I was bored. I thought that we only live once . . . so I left him to seek with someone else a better reflection of myself. And I was welcomed by Richard, amused and deceived by Didier, protected by Georges, loved by André . . . Fine reflections, in truth! And if I got lost in these complications and trivial games, if I have betrayed everyone, if I have loved no one, if I have not even suffered, and if the balance sheet shows only hurt pride and general confusion, whose fault is it really?

I think it is the fault of men who are incapable of giving us any tyranny other than their desire and their personality. Apart from that, what lack of imagination, what passivity, what a sentimental rut . . . Our lovers are so wrapped up in their job, their duties, their business one would think that since the original sin they have acquired a liking for work and that they are important and justified in their own eyes only when they have too much to do! So what use to women are liberty, the acceptance of risks and the need of romance, if there are no longer any men capable of taking advantage of them?

I have at last discovered that when a woman stays with her husband and takes a part-time lover who is free between six and eight o'clock every day except Saturday and Sunday when he takes the children for a walk, it is not caution, it is resignation.

It's true that girls are poorly educated: they are taught that males are creatures to be feared, when really they are inoffensive and you must do them violence before they become dangerous. . . ! My poor mother told me once that I must, in order to please, be reserved and leave all the initiative to the gentlemen. The dear woman can't have come across much "initiative," otherwise she would have realized just how seldom seducers seduce. All my misfortunes are perhaps due to that good old education which declares that the hen should not crow in the presence of the rooster.

I go out with Richard. He doesn't even know the address of a nice restaurant. I ought to have suggested La Tour d'Argent and ruined him pleasantly. No doubt I should then have been closer to the idea he has of "the woman." Poor Richard . . . I ought to have gobbled up the grandmother's earrings to give the grandson the delicious impression of having loved a vamp. . . !

Instead of letting Didier lead me through Paris tracking down Monsieur Chateaubriand's loves, I ought to have obliged him to seduce me as he wanted . . . It was up to me to make him my lover. In my room he would have had better things to do than lose his buttons in the arms of your aunt!

To Georges, when he held tight to the table as if to restrain himself from violating me, I had only to say, "Go right ahead, my friend, don't hold yourself back."

As for André, I ought to have prevented him from transforming me into an houri by inventing some rare and complicated nervous disease which would have obliged him to doctor me. Then, between two attacks, I would demand to see the pyramids before going lion hunting in the Atlas Mountains . . . In spare moments we could have gone to London for tea. I'm sure the doctor would have discovered much sooner that I was a woman . . . and yet, dear André is perhaps the only man I have ever met! It's hopeless, for if André is a man, then men have no time for women except to prove to them that they are men . . . And we expect them to put the world at our feet! . . .

Hélène Challenberg has the right idea. She doesn't wait. She takes. She leads the show. She goes where she wishes with whomsoever she wishes when she wishes—and it doesn't prevent her from making a fortune . . . I think the future belongs to this type of woman, a sort of third sex combining fantasy with a liking for work, who will perhaps one day do for men what they haven't been able to do for us.

In any case, it is about time we did away with the idea of the real woman according to mothers, and taught young girls that if they want passion and amusement they must work as hard for the one as for the other.

As for the myth you seem to believe concerning feminine capriciousness and disorder, let me point out that since woman, deprived of initiative, is merely a reflection of her partner, this so-called disorder shows only a masculine anarchy in which weakness and indecision struggle for the upper hand. Remember that until André thought me unfaithful there was no talk of marriage . . . and when Didier whispered in my ear that he had recaptured youth and purity it came from the same lips which, on my bed, had covered Marie-Laure with kisses. Is that what you call order and logic?

But I'm getting away from the subject . . . I suppose I needed to get it off my chest and end this jabbering about life, men, women, pleasure, desire, temptations of the soul, morality of the mind—unless it is vice versa—and the whole bag of tricks used by vacant hearts who have nothing better to do than to apply hackneyed generalities to specific cases.

Since leaving the Rue de Lille all that seems like so much hogwash. May the ladies win, lose, get themselves to a nunnery, be kidnapped by the Berbers or commit suicide for love, I couldn't care less. I've put all that out of my mind. So I shan't lift a finger to "bring André back." Anyhow I think he has suffered enough as it is and that he has insulted me sufficiently.

I'm sorry to send you such an idiotic letter. Like all letters of this type, I particularly wrote it to strengthen me in my resolutions. So, my friend, you must give up hoping to make a lady out of your poor Albertine who is too fond of Count Molé's story.

My love,

Albertine

P.S. I'm not yet short of money, but as I soon will be, thank you in advance.

Saturday the twenty-sixth

I shall probably be the only one to think your new theories full of common sense. I am astonished, however, to hear you accuse the gentlemen of making you live in a rut. The rut has led you quite far . . . two weeks ago you wanted to see Hélène in her grave and now you cite her as the model of future womanhood. So, drawing a lesson from these changes in perspective and at the risk of being called a busybody, I should like to say this to you:

Today you have put all that out of your mind. Tomorrow memory will reopen a badly healed wound and you will regret having let Hélène win. You know that she will be impudent when she does. Your generosity, far from helping the doctor, may very well put him back in the clutches of a woman who makes a fool of him. Is that what you want?

You must, without bringing André into it since you are reluctant to do that, make your breaking-off with him cause his breaking-off with Hélène. Their separation will allow you in the future to think back on all this with a sense of justice. Didn't your poor mother also teach you that the wicked must be punished? So I suggest that you send André the enclosed letter. If my arguments are not sufficient to convince you, please do this one last thing for me. I consider myself personally offended by Hélène, and not having had my soul purified by a change of address, I should like to see the story end as well as possible for our pride.

Affectionately,
Cécile

Draft of Letter:

Was it really inevitable, my dear André, that we should separate with insults? It is a sad and vulgar ending. I would not even reply to your letter if I didn't feel that you suf-

ferred as much in writing those unhappy words as I did in reading them. The decision I have taken never to see you again does not prevent my wishing to avoid a misunderstanding and I wanted to tell you, in order to protect the past which will remain dear to me, that it is true that I did not go to Bordeaux.

It was a pretext to postpone a decision which was much more important than you realized. I needed to think it over. When Marie-Laure suggested I spend a week end at the Herbins' with Georges, I jumped at the chance, thinking that among strangers I would have a change of surroundings to help me reach a decision. I was totally unaware that I would meet your wife and Didier whom she had invited without telling him that I would be there too. I insist on the fact that Didier, you and I were all victims of the trap laid by the two ladies. I can't prove the truth of this statement, but let me ask you these questions:

Why all the stage setting if I had wanted to spend a week end with Didier? Do you think the Herbins' home is an ideal place to hide love scenes? Who could profit from the publicity of these scenes if not your wife to whom, it appears, you had announced your intention of divorce. In any case this would be an error because in that crowd, where success doesn't depend on easiness alone, she has just made a brilliant display of her possibilities. Didn't she fix it so that she would be able to sleep under the same roof with the young man she calls her protégé while succeeding in making you believe that it was with me that he spent the night? Your letter shows how well she succeeded. I am sad only because you, knowing her so well, never suspected that all this was a plot against us. Your readiness to insult me has made reconciliation permanently impossible.

I'm too tired to know if I'm sorry about it.

Albertine

May 2

Dear Cécile,

It's late and I have just posted the letter to André. I simply added that Marie-Laure had asked me to move out.

In copying the letter, I was delighted to see that the lies seemed more like the truth than the truth itself. That's what made me decide to send it, besides wanting to show Hélène that Didier had betrayed her. She certainly never imagined I would find out that she had planned the week end with Marie-Laure. I feel much better. You're right: she had to learn that I knew. Now all that is over and done with.

I am discovering how difficult it is to break away from oneself. Other people won't let you. Since coming to the Quai Voltaire I have had nothing but visitors, all of them driven by clumsy solicitude. I feel like a young widow being watched for the first indication of a return to normal. Georges, Richard and your dear uncle—who would have believed it?—came one after the other to bring me the traditional lilies of the valley. That dear man Alfred got all tangled up in contradictory explanations in which his wife was accused, excused and dismissed, all in the same breath. Anyway, it's nothing very serious . . . just a little misunderstanding between women . . . but had he known in time he would have prevented my departure. Why didn't I go to him for help! My extreme youth would have found in him the advice and guidance I so sorely lacked. All those young fellows are pretty thoughtless. I agreed with him so readily that he took my hand and, while *kneading* it, said these charming words: "My dear child, I am the only one to blame . . ."

Richard transported my furniture to Georges's and ever since then has been sitting here, silent and withdrawn as

though he were in church. But his silence is a cry of love which pierces my eardrums.

Georges, on the contrary, has that cheeriness used only with people who are very ill. He calls me "his little snake" because I "have changed my skin" and he brings me detective stories to read. And so he has my furniture in a small flat "where one simply cannot resist him . . ." I took his word for it and sent him to Birnbaum's to arrange my resignation. I forgot to tell you that I haven't been near that place since I moved. It seems that I am a perfect example of "deconditioning." Georges didn't take it too badly: he has a charming Italian barman to replace me! Poor Birnbaum. My eyes have at last been opened to the real reason for that madman's kindness to Georges and his protégés, and I also understand my role in the department: by correcting the mistranslations of those gentlemen I allowed them to enjoy a little literary prestige in the cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés without which their taste would appear less elegant. I had never suspected a thing, but Georges hinted that he had always liked my "true simplicity toward life's most diverse problems . . . !"

Anyway my consolers come daily to explain my soul to me and to keep an eye on the revolution going on in my heart. I much prefer the visits from Florence, who returned from the South last week. At last I have found the answer to the riddle. I can tell you, because she no longer hides the fact that she is pregnant and she is genuinely overjoyed.

"Just the enjoyment I get from infuriating my step-mother would be enough," she told me, "but really I'm thrilled. I'm going to live with Roger. I refused to marry him and he was so astounded that he fell in love with me. I have never been so happy."

I congratulated her, but all these complications don't amuse me. I have only one pleasure these days: to go down

the Seine in an excursion boat singing to myself on deck Georges's latest ditty:

*My love and I lay down on grass
One balmy day in May
But ants therein did sting her...
I should have chosen hay!*

An easy occupation for an easy woman!

Love,
Albertine

Saturday, May 3

Dear Albertine,

How wrong it is to speak of men's egotism. A young lady in distress finds a thousand people to console her. Let them swamp you with flowers—I have just received a compliment which is much more satisfying for our pride. Miffed by my refusal to receive him, Didier is marking time all the more readily now that our victory—yours and mine—is imminent. Here is the beginning of his letter:

Dear Cécile, Am I to thank you for having disappointed a friend in the name of friendship? I know how fond you are of Albertine and I foresee, from your loyalty to her, happy days to come for me, because I too am your friend, am I not? So I will postpone my visit and will come to you only when it is possible and agreeable for you to welcome me.

Don't worry about a young woman whom you protect so well: your ability to manage people will permit her to win a duel which seemed hopeless, for I believe, my dear, that you have won. I don't know how—but I saw Hélène Challengberg yesterday. She is running round in circles. For the first time she is losing control of an in-

trigue and calls on others to help her. She asked me to go on pretending to have an affair with Albertine. Seeing my reluctance to do this, she didn't hesitate to use our friendship as blackmail—but can we call friendship that sort of admiration I have for her which wanes at the first sign of weakness? However that may be, I refused, or rather—for I don't want to become her enemy—I pointed out that Albertine had sent me away and no longer wanted to see me . . . This really isn't a lie, for though Albertine said nothing to me, you enlightened me as to her feelings on the subject.

Then too, my dear, the moment arrives when secondary characters should leave the stage. The situation now concerns Hélène and her husband. Let's leave them alone together. Albertine with her feminine intuition understood that and got out in time. I withdraw in turn. Exeunt devils! . . .

The rest of the letter doesn't concern you. I must tell you, however, that our devil is looking after himself; he got himself invited to some university in America to give a series of lectures and he is leaving shortly. Nothing could be more favorable to back up your statements to André.

How simple the human machine is! You have only to press the right button to set off the desired reaction. But let's not rejoice too soon—tell me what echoes you hear up there.

Affectionately,
Cécile

Tuesday the sixth

Dear Cécile,

The echoes say that it is Marie-Laure and not Hélène who is paying the piper.

Alfred told me that on arriving home he was stopped on the landing by the sound of André's voice booming from Marie-Laure's bedroom. "A bitch, a madwoman, a dirty cheat, that isn't saying much . . . most of all, you're an idiot, my poor woman!"

"You can well imagine," Alfred said to me, "when I heard those gallant words I kept out of sight. The insulted husband, the noble father, all those roles requiring beards, have never been up my alley. So I took refuge in my study where I heard new insults which I won't repeat to you, but after a little while a silence followed by suspicious noises made me decide to go and see what was happening. I entered the bedroom and found Dr. Challenberg busily slapping my wife on the pretext that she had fainted. "Ah! There you are," he said to me. "You've come at the right moment. Don't worry, just a little fainting spell. I've done what was necessary and she's much better already. It's not surprising she has these fits with the crazy life she leads. You'd do well to watch over her more carefully and forbid her to see my wife. Those two lunatics seem unable to get up to enough asinine tricks. As for you," he said to poor Marie-Laure who was crying, "I warn you: find that address or I promise you I'll explain the nature of your nervous disorders to your husband! Is that understood?"

He left saying he couldn't be bothered with people who had to faint to make themselves interesting!

Poor André . . . his fear of wasting time has certainly made him consistently waste his by doing the wrong thing at the wrong time!

Although Alfred was too much of a gentleman to ask me any questions, I told him that Dr. Challenberg had probably come to get my new address and to complain about the way I had been treated.

"You don't see him any more?"

"No, I don't see him any more."

"My little Albertine," he said, "that is a wise decision. I was sure that one day you would understand that such a conspicuous man could not be a good choice for a young woman who, without foregoing the attentions she needs, must keep society's esteem. Yes, you need a discreet affection which will stand to one side, will yield, will be patient. That's fine, that's just fine. You'll be surprised at all the good things which will come your way because of this decision."

I was indeed surprised when he talked about the necessity of finding me a nice cozy little nest where I would feel really at home—that family has a one-track mind!—where he could visit me when it was convenient for me. He would handle everything, like an old friend. His gray hair, alas, permitted him to make this purely friendly proposition which a few years earlier would have been very much out of place . . .

He was playful and paternal . . . I acted naïve and understood nothing, thanking him but stating that I loved living at the hotel. His advances which ought to have made me laugh were the last straw. Can people really think, dear Cécile, that I'm such an easy woman?

You see, that phrase of André's is making me lose my sense of humor: when I think that I went to him to find rest and sympathy! . . .

But let's not hark back to things that are ended; it's true that by repeating it so often I must remind you of the chorus in comic operas which sings for twenty minutes "we must be off, be off, be off . . ."

So let's be off . . . But I don't mind telling you that André's anger is terribly comforting to me.

Thank you, dear Cécile.

Albertine

P.S. I'm sorry but, surrounded as I am by helpful people, I must ask you for 50,000 francs.

Friday the ninth

My dear Albertine, while you are playing the repentant girl in your corner, Public Rumor is calling you a vamp: André Challenberg is getting a divorce—so I learn from Didier's letter of the ninth. I admit that the victory exceeds my every expectation and I admire your doctor for sacrificing his interests to his passion without a guarantee on your part.

But let's talk seriously: do you or do you not care about the man? His behavior offers only two solutions: marry him or run away from him, for he won't give you any other alternative.

I have always known you to be sincere and I think that you will admit that you are not in love with him. In that case, please don't let him force you into something you don't want. I'm not so partial that I can't understand the charm of such self-confident authority. If you are attracted by this charm, get out of Paris; come to us, nobody will know. Last week I opened Clairjac for the summer. We go there only for week ends but I would leave Annette with you and you could forget all about past events. The weather is lovely already and the wind from the sea has the fragrance of flowering pines . . . Come, Albertine, believe me: certain victories are endings in themselves and we ought not to try to harvest the fruit.

Apropos, do you know what Alain said in 1914 on hearing the standard phrase "We'll get them!" "Yes," he replied, "but what will we do with them then?"

Think it over, darling.

Affectionately,
Cécile

P.S. I am enclosing Didier's letter and a check. Another will follow when you want it.

Didier's Letter:

My dear Cécile, I hope I am the first to announce the event which opens the spring season: the Challengbergs' divorce! One of those strokes of luck, thanks to which a writer can be certain that Fate sanctions his vocation, allowed me to witness the last act of the drama and you, my dear, certainly deserve to have my first-hand description of it.

Yesterday afternoon I found yet another message from Hélène summoning me immediately to her rescue. I found her nervous, and hiding her bad temper so poorly that she seemed to have summoned me only to tell me that she didn't want to see me. Pretending not to notice this, I told her a few anecdotes and chattered on gaily until I had the surprise of hearing the same woman, who the week before had asked me to carry on my pretended affair with Albertine, now say this to me:

"My dear, I have always counted on you to amuse me, and you have never let me down, because your gift for getting into ridiculous situations is inimitable, but I must tell you that such situations amuse me only in so far as they do not inconvenience me. Now, quite frankly, you have been tactless in this business. You ought to have foreseen that by flaunting yourself with that girl you risked complicating my life. Your thoughtlessness has put me in a very touchy position. I detest forced decisions. What's more, André is a big help to me. He has a lot of common sense and in everyday life, my dear, women need an organizer, not a clown."

She stopped abruptly after this rebuff, for the organizer came into the room in his shirt sleeves, carrying a stack of

files which he put on the desk. Embarrassed and not knowing what to do, I just stood there forcing a smile which was wasted, because without appearing to see me, Challenberg turned to his wife and said, "I have just gone over your business files. Everything is in order. In that folder you have the estimate and bills for decorating the flat along with the architect's verifications. I have found all the receipts since we have been here except for three months in '37. I was in America and you must have paid them yourself. No doubt they are in your personal papers. Apart from that . . . let's see . . . everything is settled. Do you want to have a look?"

Hélène went to the desk, and together they thumbed through the files. Hearing them discuss management, lease, insurance, tax deductions, contracts, dates of payment, renewals and income taxes, I realized that I was witnessing the end of a household.

Both had forgotten my presence. Hélène was replying curtly to certain questions of detail, and little by little the temperature rose. Eventually Challenberg boiled over and declared that he had been very decent to take care of such trifles, that he had better things to do than file papers, and that she shouldn't try to make too much of an ass of him . . . "You can consider yourself lucky that I suggested a friendly divorce," he yelled. "It was out of politeness only, for you know perfectly well that the law is on my side. But you're such an idiot that you are quite capable of forgetting the fact!"

Hélène, calmed by her husband's anger, replied with a smile that his politeness was really due to his fear of becoming even more ridiculous by advertising all over Paris certain marital disappointments which could damage his career and compromise his budding reputation as a seducer. "But don't worry," she added. "I have no intention of

embarrassing you. You can rely on me to act just as if all the faults really were yours. To play the game, I'll ask for everything the law allows me. By the way, have you discussed the question of alimony with the lawyer?"

Challenberg's jaw dropped and he threw up his arms. "Your alimony," he bellowed, "your alimony! I'll be damned, that idea had never entered my head! You honor me, my dear. I'd never have believed that your husband's departure would leave you so disabled that you would need a pension! . . . But never mind that. If you want alimony you shall have it. And what price do you put on the injury suffered by the absence of a male at your side?" Saying this, he looked at me as if calling me to witness this astounding news and, as I couldn't help smiling, he said, "Look, even Marèze can't get over it. Alimony. Right . . . And what will you do with it? Oh well, it will allow you to buy a hat. All right, it's understood, I'll let the lawyer know and we'll fix it up. That's that. This is lovely, but *I* at least have other things to do. Anyhow, you know where to find me . . . Besides, you have Marèze . . ."

And he left, shrugging his shoulders. His sniggering could be heard in the corridor.

Hélène was very pale when she turned to me, and I admired the effort she made to control herself.

"It's a pity," she murmured at last. "Yes, it's a pity that we should separate just when he was beginning to show signs of a little wit. Oh well . . . others will reap what I have sown. I'm used to that."

She gave me a melancholy little smile which brought back all her charm. Then she said:

"But isn't it strange, Didier, and a little sad to watch the departure of a person with whom one has lived for fifteen years and not to feel any regret?"

I pointed out that the clumsiness of her strategies, in

addition to causing her to lose a man whom for the first time she had tried to keep, had also made me suspect that Challenberg was not as unimportant to her as she claimed.

She didn't deny this but said that it was impossible for her to distinguish between hurt pride and real unhappiness. We agreed that we were alike in this respect.

Hélène fell silent, and this new pensive sadness surprised and fascinated me. I began to regret having to go to America so soon and I left her, marveling at the fickleness of the heart.

There, my dear Cécile, is a denouement which will surely please you. For my part, knowing how little creatures really act, this ending is so unexpected that it smacks of fiction; in other words, it has bowled me over.

I kiss your hands.

Didier

Sunday night

Dear Cécile, I heard the news before your letter arrived and I had come to the same conclusion as you. The moment of triumph over, I saw the risk of being drawn back into a situation I had just escaped. Indeed, flight seems to be the only solution. Since you told me about Clairjac everything seems simpler, but thank you nonetheless for understanding that I can't give up a lover as despotic as André without some regrets. I received—for Marie-Laure gave him my address—a letter from him which I burned so as to be able to resist the temptation of sending it on to you. I believe we have no right to betray certain cries from the heart, certain words . . . Yet we have exchanged many letters, my dear Cécile, and I haven't kept from you my own or other people's shame . . . so why this secrecy in the face of something noble? I leave to your wisdom the task

of judging this quirk in human nature! . . . I wrote to André saying that, as he wasn't one of those men to whom one can declare that they are admired instead of loved, I was bidding him good-by. This act of courage wore me out and I didn't appreciate, as I should have, the final act of our friend, Didier. It was he who told me about André's divorce, adding that there was no longer any reason why we shouldn't see each other and that he would like to say good-by before leaving for Boston.

I had dinner with him last night, and I saw how a good devil makes an exit . . . He told me first that, although he was delighted by our mutual victory, he deplored the price of glory.

"Pride," he explained, "and intellectual activities are cruel masters. I am deprived, my dear, of the pleasure of making you forget moments which were not all I had hoped for, and you, being a woman, perhaps unconsciously are angry with me? . . ."

I had no chance to reassure him for he continued, "You see, the great difference between men and women lies in the fact that in love women are physical while men are metaphysical! . . ." God!

Therein, it appears, lies the central theme of one of his lectures entitled: "The Moral Value of Love." While he was leading me through a maze, in which man, a refined being, has the transcendent role which is sometimes denied him, I was thinking of those poor young American girls who are going to swallow all this twaddle as Gospel truth . . .

After a few detours we got back to Héléne whom he blames for taking revenge for her husband's departure by telling everyone that she doesn't like men, that poor André had certainly been patient and that he had led a dog's life. "She ought to realize," complained Didier, "that

the truth is sometimes superfluous!" In any case, she refused to let André buy back her shares in the laboratory; but he, by a bit of underhand work, is said to have enlarged the company to his own benefit with the help of straw men, so that Hélène now finds herself a minority shareholder. This detail proves that André did take precautions before sacrificing his interests to his passion . . . which consoles me a little. Seeing that I was sad, Didier told me that we must, according to Anatole France's theory, judge each other with charitable skepticism. He advised me nonetheless to marry André. "And so," he said with a sunny smile, "when I return, he will no longer be a rival." In other words, our lion is ready to give up Hélène to remain the lover of Madame Challenberg! . . .

The next day I received a bouquet of peonies accompanied by this quatrain:

*The chisel of kisses
Chips away at the years.
Beware, beware, beware
Of shattered memories.*

. . . and I laughed, thinking that if André was determined to marry me every time he thought I was Didier's mistress, Didier desired me only when he thought I was André's. We forget too quickly the commonplace aspects of events in which we are personally involved.

I dream of Clairjac like a paradise without apple or serpent. There's just one thing: I'd like to have my boat to go out on the lake. Couldn't you go to Jacques and borrow it? He would certainly lend it to you, since you are the last remaining bond between him and me.

Thanks for the check. Could you send me another for

the same amount, so that I can settle a few debts and buy my ticket? You can see that it's high time I left Paris.

Love,

Albertine

Tuesday the thirteenth

Albertine darling, you will find your boat at Clairjac. We went to get it on Saturday and Jacques helped us tie it on the car. As I watched him working and chatting with us, I saw more clearly what lurks under that courteous veneer which is a form of masculine shyness. He was thinking only of you and talking only of the sun, the wind, of the need to revarnish the hull . . . He loves you, Albertine, and though I have always judged him severely after hearing your side of the story, I was thinking that this man—who is neither a graduate of the Polytechnique, nor a brute, nor impotent, nor homosexual—probably had no other flaw than that of being . . . a husband!

By a strange association of ideas, I suddenly think of Didier's poetry which I too received as a sort of farewell:

*In fickleness my heart's proficient
At flightiness my mind's efficient
'Tis hard to prove my love is true.
And though my ardor be sufficient
I fear you'd find my mind deficient
If I confined my heart to you.*

You can see that our seducer is afflicted like all men with that serious-mindedness which doesn't need encouragement to persevere.

I am overjoyed at the thought of seeing you soon—and a bit nostalgic too. Thanks to you I have shared in adventures which amused me. I found a lot of unexpected enjoyment—too much—in the games, and I sometimes feel a

growing temptation to experience what, so far, I have only known second-hand: but . . . let's wait until summer is over.

A bientôt, my sweet.

Impatiently yours,

Cécile

Friday

My dear Cécile,

I have the impression that I am leaving Paris under a shower of poetry and affection. . . "On Albertine's Grave!" Everyone is so nice that I'm becoming sad too. Florence cried at the thought of my departure—between two fits of laughing. It seems that Roger went to Georges to complain that Florence refused to marry him though she was expecting his child. He finds that immoral . . . Your cousin replied, "My poor man, I understand that it's not funny to be an unwed father, but, you see, in our family we can still throw our legs about but not our fists! . . ."

Another funny story: Alfred received a bill from Dr. Challenberg for 180,000 francs for two years of treatment given to Madame A. Robert-Guichard. Each consultation is noted with date and time.

"The cad," grumbled your uncle. "He has even counted the bits of advice we asked him for when he came to dinner with Hélène."

His bill ended with this handwritten phrase, "Regretting my inability to continue a medical treatment outside my field, I suggest the name of my good friend, Dr. Fraichon, who is a very conscientious psychiatrist."

Marie-Laure had the nerve to speak of ingratitude. Your uncle got angry, "I wonder, my dear, what *your* treatment of *him* was to justify such a bill!"

Hysterics followed. Between two sobs your dear aunt

could only repeat, "That creature! Oh! that creature!"

"That creature means you," Florence told me. "She accuses you of having cast a spell over her 'poor husband'."

"One broken marriage isn't enough for her, now she wants to destroy *my* home!" Marie-Laure wailed.

At last, using the pretext of the successive shocks she had received and the resulting need of tenderness, she has reinstated the conjugal bed to the immense joy of your poor old uncle who, like all those of his sex, really wants peace, order and economy. "Poor Papa," said Florence, "he has never had any luck..."

But for Marie-Laure, the danger—"that creature"—is still too close for comfort so she is preparing to drag her retrieved victim to Italy. She leaves for Ischia in two weeks "to go into retreat in one of those rare convents still existing in Europe..." Florence thinks it is a former cloister transformed into a hotel with a good deal of luxury like those around Amalfi. In any case, Herbin was called in to design a little traveling suit which he has already christened "Santa Chiara Monastery"... Florence told me that at the first fitting your aunt was angelic: a real Botticelli! She is much comforted by that. "My dear Herbin," she sighed, "sooner or later we must all cast out the superfluous and look deep into our souls... You'll see, you'll see, when you have really suffered."

Alfred confirmed this comedy when he came to see me, very embarrassed, with two small pale orchids in a black velvet box. He told me that his dear wife's health required a change of climate, that in her present condition there could be no question of letting her go off alone but that, as soon as he returned, we would have many more good talks... I told him that I too was leaving. We mourned together for a moment, and he kissed me on both cheeks when he left.

It's time I left—it will be on Tuesday or at the latest Wednesday, because that fool Richard reserved my seat on the wrong side so that I would be traveling backwards, and I don't know if he can change the seat for another on the same train. As I was saying, it's time I left, because André refuses to admit that he isn't the answer to my happiness. "I received your note," he wrote. "Have you really decided to be unhappy all your life? Although I realize that one can't force happiness on people, I shall try nonetheless. I won't let you lose me out of mere pride.

"I love you, think it over a little longer. C."

I replied that I needed to be alone.

He telephones constantly. I gave the hotel switchboard instructions that I am not in when Dr. Challenberg phones. He caught on quickly and gives false names, but I recognize his voice and hang up. I'm sad, Cécile; how unlucky that the only person who could have entertained me insists on marrying me!

Thanks for the check, the boat, the unexpected praise of my husband—but believe me, Jacques doesn't love me. If he did, he never would have let me leave.

Oh well, let's not think about all this any longer. It will be difficult enough to go through Bordeaux. I'm counting on you to get me out of there as quickly as possible.

I'll write as soon as I have my ticket.

Love,
Albertine

Saturday the seventeenth

I received your telegram, dear Cécile. Don't worry about me. I stood my ground. However, I wasn't able to avoid the meeting I dreaded. André waited for me in his car last night almost in front of the hotel and when I came out he

ran up to me. I couldn't get away. He made me get in the car and we talked. He tried to keep calm, and said that my pride was going to ruin two lives; he kept coming back to that letter which he had written in a fit of anger—the sole cause, in his opinion, of my attitude. In the meantime, I was too preoccupied with keeping an expression of "it's too late now" on my face to follow the thread of his speech. I heard only odd sentences, all of them beginning with "Listen to me, will you, listen! . . ." I finally told him—for courage is always lacking in such cases—that I was wrong perhaps but that I was going back to Bordeaux to give it a try . . . At that he exploded and I found the Challenberg of the old days.

"Ah, well now, if that isn't a good one! A try! . . . and it's for little bitches like that that we men turn our lives topsy-turvy. Why don't you admit you're frightened! And yet, my poor little idiot, you're not in danger. I don't know what your Jacques does for a living but I imagine I'm just as capable of supporting a wife as he is, am I not? Besides, he didn't hit it off very well with you! Are you really going back to that . . . Ah! You make me laugh with your 'try' as if in three years of marriage you hadn't had time to see that you had married a poor excuse for a man! . . . Well, bravo, it's really worse than I thought . . ." and he went on and on.

Without listening to the words, I heard that voice: hard, clear and precise, that voice that I had loved and still love in spite of its brutality, because it disturbs me . . . which is one of those inexplicable things in life.

But he shouldn't have mentioned Jacques. I jumped out of the car and ran toward my hotel. He drove away at once without trying to call me back. In another minute I would have shed on his shoulder the tears which I wept on my pillow. I was saved by his anger. I'm drained of all energy but happy that it is over.

I leave by train at 8:30 on Tuesday morning, as Richard eventually managed to reserve a good seat. By way of thanks I told him that he should have known that I was "neuro-vegetative" and consequently couldn't bear riding backwards...

I'll forget André—of course I shall—but I'll always remember words like that one which he taught me. It's in that way I suppose that people become "cortico-visceral." I'm a little blue. "Never more" is a painful thought.

There it is. Round trip. Life is amusing: I have too many things to do to know whether I'm happy or unhappy that it's all over. I only know I'm eager to see you again.

My love,

Albertine

Epilogue

Albertine reached Bordeaux three minutes early. Her husband, notified by Cécile, was waiting for her on the platform, pale and strained by uncertainty.

She threw herself into his arms, sobbing.

Ten months later she gave birth to a handsome little boy whom she named, in all simplicity, "Alexander."

Albertine had at last found her master.

With each passing year she discovers in this child the traits of courage, fantasy and imagination she denies in the rest of the male population.

Now and again she is conscious of her husband's existence, but it is always to blame him for being unable to do extravagant things for his wife and for not understanding his son in the least.

Jacques is very happy for he wants above all else a normal life.

(Continued from front flap)

There is Didier, a highly articulate man of letters for whom words, unfortunately, speak much louder than action. Although Albertine falls in love with him, she decides instead to become the mistress of Dr. Challenberg, who, if not as fluent as Didier, does have an overwhelming admiration for her health, which is matched only by his ardor for her beauty. And there are such further distractions as Georges, Alfred and, of course, faithful old Richard, whose designs on Albertine are—at least temporarily—strictly honorable.

And so the experiences of the young-but-not-so-innocent lamb in the lions' den unfold. And if it turns out that the lions are being taken advantage of by the lamb, it is only because they—like everyone who reads this story—are unable to resist falling under the spell of Albertine, a modern minx whose completely amoral philosophy is as enlightening as it is entertaining.

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